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And Gizmondo makes five. Yes, the launch of a new piece of hardware gives *five* handheld gaming devices to choose from. Not just for you as a consumer, but for the world's game-development community too. So… that's Sony's PSP, Nintendo's DS, Nokia's N-Gage QD, Tiger Telematics' Gizmondo and Tapwave's Zodiac, in addition to Nintendo's Game Boy Advance, Sony's PlayStation2, Microsoft's Xbox, Nintendo's GameCube, PCs, Macintoshes, Sega's Dreamcast, roughly 38,224 configurations of mobile phones, internet, interactive TV, coin-ops, even Sinclair's ZX Spectrum (if you're Matthew Smith)… Oh, and not forgetting the trifling matters of Nintendo's Revolution, Sony's PlayStation3, and Microsoft's next-generation Xbox. Mobile variants aside, that makes 20 formats to consider.

It has never been like this. Once, game developers agonised over having to make their masterworks available to play on the Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum *and* Amstrad CPC464. But 20 formats? No wonder there are so many thoroughly terrible games out there – it's not enough that the goalposts keep moving; a ton of extra rules are being continually thrown on to the pitch. No wonder, too, that developers are becoming increasingly vocal when it comes to airing their grievances. The rise of internet communications and personal blogs has already pushed this activity into previously uncharted territory, but more recently we have also seen the traditionally staid Game Developers Conference in San Francisco play host to a remarkable outpouring of frank condemnation. Read about it this month beginning on page 58.

When you're drinking in the delights of *God Of War* (p76) or *Wipeout Pure* (p78), it's easy to ignore the issues that have the opportunity to damage our pastime. It's only in recognising them, though, that the videogame industry will safeguard its future.



EDGE

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"I'm drinking wine and eating cheese, and catching some rays, you know..."



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GDC births HD era

Head of Xbox J Allard uses industry get-together to pledge Microsoft's commitment to shaping the next generation

If E3 is where you get to see the videogame industry roar, the Game Developers Conference is where you get to hear it think. Alongside lectures on Why You Should Have Paid Attention In Multivariable Calculus and Efficient Proximity Mapping In Highly Dynamic Environments, GDC has become a place where game makers can sit down and hear Peter Molyneux discuss the lessons he learned during the making of *Fable*, or listen in on Greg Zeschuk outlining Bioware's unusually specific approach to videogame storytelling. It's also where the big players take the stage and deliver their visions of the future and the message they hope will inspire the loyalty of the development teams in the room, while simultaneously playing well with the army of international media that descends on GDC in the hope of unexpected or indiscreet exclusives.

It's at this point that the tensions at the heart of GDC start to become plain. Microsoft's keynote speech, delivered by the always-charismatic vice president of Xbox, **J Allard**, unquestionably caused the biggest splash. It wasn't quite Oprah's free-car-for-everyone extravaganza, but it came close. On arrival, everyone in the audience was issued with one of three colour-coded tags. No one knew why until the end of the presentation, when Allard announced during the course of a *Forza* demo that everyone with a tag matching the colour of the car that came first would receive a 23-inch HDTV, courtesy of Microsoft. It was an electrifying stunt – applauded as generous and spectacular by the those had winning yellow tags and derided as an insensitive, empty gesture by those who didn't – but one that backfired to the extent that the buzz following the giveaway overshadowed the serious points that Allard had set out during his keynote.

Xbox 2 won't be a transparent device; it will have a character and functionality of its own, and will have a pervasive effect on the games to which it plays host

Of these, the idea that the HD era is coming – along with the new standards it will require in graphical processing and artistic ambition – was certainly central. However, Allard was emphatic that Microsoft would be the manufacturer best placed to support developers as they ramp up production standards to meet the technological potential of the next generation. He announced XNA Studio (due in 2006), a Windows-based application intended to bring the streamlining benefits outlined in last year's XNA announcements to all stages of the development process, from bug tracking to final build submission. Little was officially announced about the Xbox 2 hardware, other than a promise that multicore processors will deliver "a teraflop of targeting computing performance," and a pledge that developing for Xbox 2 would be a familiar process for those who had worked on the original Xbox. With 3,000 Xenon dev kits already shipped, developers across the world are already making up their minds about how well Microsoft has delivered on these issues.

But beyond the ease of software development and the power of the hardware, it was clear that Allard is focusing attention on an element of console manufacture the existence of which Nintendo and Sony have both only recently recognised: services. He unveiled Xbox 2's frontend, a scrupulously neutral interface designed to unify the entirety of a user's gaming experience in a few core screens. Taking cues from MSN Messenger, your Xbox 2 profile has space for your photo, a listing for your location, and it displays a tally of your gaming 'achievements' (fastest laps and so on) and your overall gaming 'score', enabling you to boast of your skills online and find opponents of a suitable skill level. Response to the frontend was mixed, with some attendees finding the presentation of the screens bland and 'un-gamey'.



GDC's move to San Francisco from San Diego had a mixed response, some rejoicing that the small rooms were now bigger but lamenting that the big rooms were smaller. The weather wasn't bad, though



Choice cuts

Half-Life 2 tops the Game Developer Choice Awards

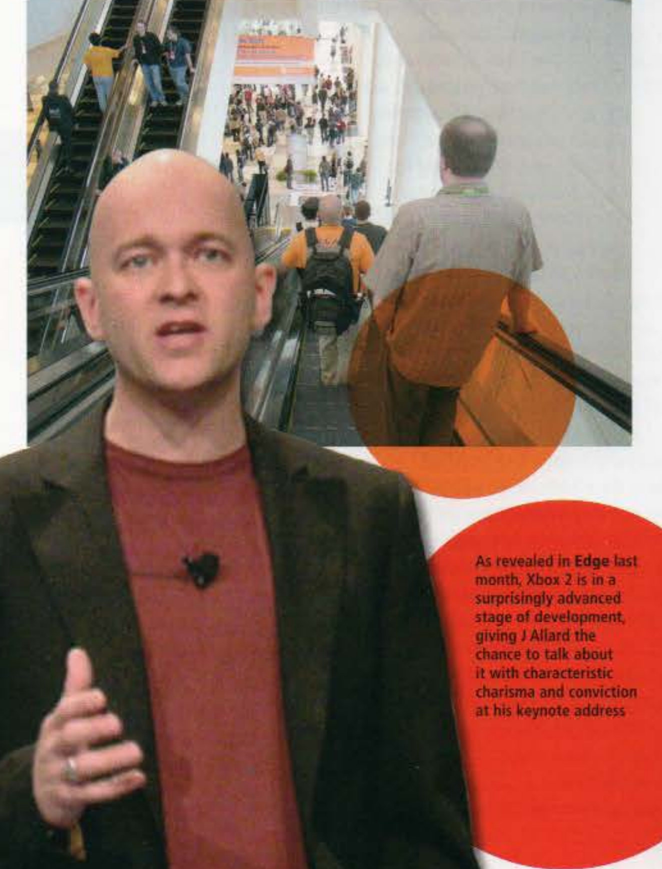
At an extended ceremony which had left delgates grumbling with boredom, *Half-Life 2* was announced as this year's best game of the GDCA. The visual arts award went to *World Of WarCraft* and *Katamari Damacy* took one of the three awards for innovation. Eugene Jarvis was also rewarded for his lifetime achievements in the games industry. The lower-profile Independent Game Festival awards were dominated by *Gish* and *Wik And The Fable Of Souls*, which are profiled on p58.







The screens revealed for Xbox 2's UI certainly look sleek, modern and slightly less niche than the original Xbox's modder-pleasing green glow. Players will need to brace themselves, however, for seeing their gameplaying hours totted up over the years



As revealed in Edge last month, Xbox 2 is in a surprisingly advanced stage of development, giving J Allard the chance to talk about it with characteristic charisma and conviction at his keynote address

Others were dispirited by the emphasis on the kind of bragging rights and hard-edged competitive streaks that give the online space the hostile reputation many gamers find off-putting. While there was certainly a tension behind the neutrality of the presentation and the unashamedly hardcore aspects of the functionality, there's no question that it promises to fundamentally shift the way people interact with their game machine. The next-generation Xbox will no longer be a transparent device that becomes a *Halo* machine or a *Burnout* machine depending on which disc it has in it. Instead, it will have a character and a functionality all of its own, and will have a pervasive effect on the games to which it plays host.

Key to this is the system of micropayments which Xbox 2's infrastructure will support, enabling players not just to buy content from gamemakers, but also from each other as they are encouraged to put their own customised cars or costumes up for sale to other players, albeit for a trifling sum. All in all, the presentation left some delegates questioning how successfully Microsoft will be able to appeal to a wider spectrum of gamers with Xbox 2. Still perceived as a hardcore gaming platform, some sectors of the development community are worried that Microsoft, by focusing on HD technology and online services, is moving ahead faster than the market. There's no doubt that the time is coming when all gamers will be playing online (whether they realise they are or not), and that HD will become the new televisual standard (in the US at least). The big question now is whether or not it will become widespread enough, quickly enough to coincide with the lifespan of Microsoft's next console.

At the Nintendo keynote, **Satoru Iwata**'s approach couldn't have been more of a contrast. He set out to charm his audience, emphasising how much he had in common with his fellow developers by telling anecdotes about his early days at HAL – the all-night stints to finish projects on time, and his reliance on the universal developer diet of pizza. It was testament to his charisma – as well as to his command of English – that this fairly obvious ploy didn't rankle with a roomful of developers, for many of whom crunch wasn't a piece of happy nostalgia but a current and consistent tyranny. Iwata went on to discuss what he felt had changed during his years in the games industry, and what had stayed the same. His conclusions lead up to the point that's been his rallying call for the past year: that although the games industry is growing and the games are becoming more elaborate, the real range of what is on offer is shrinking. As rising costs force publishers to become more conservative, he suggested there was a danger that if the industry is "spending more time and money chasing exactly the same players, then who are we leaving behind? Are we creating games just for each other?"

Arguing that designers need to set themselves the challenge of creating games they themselves wouldn't want to play, he suggested that the DS line-up illustrated Nintendo's approach to the wider gaming market, with a device whose unique interface catered to current non-gamers, but which was host to titles such as *Metroid Hunters*, which appealed to the game-literate hobbyist. Then, rather undercutting his argument that games needed to be tailored to fit the experience of their audience, he unveiled the big gun, the game that would "appeal to all gamers, just like every previous version," the new *Legend Of Zelda*. It was spectacular stuff, showing that more of the DNA of classic *Zelda* gameplay will be evident in the new game than initial information indicated.

From one safe franchise to the next – an eightplayer wireless demo of *Mario Kart DS* was followed by a pledge that the DS is soon to go seamlessly and easily online, with an easy-to-use wifi service that will be, surprisingly, free. It was an odd moment, to see the president of Nintendo advocating online gaming, and one that raises some interesting questions. Nintendo's reluctance





to commit to online gaming has always (it claims) been based on its caution about whether there's a great demand for it. Only time will tell whether taking the DS online is a sign that the company has finally caved in to the pressure to catch up with other manufacturers, or if it has been right to hold off for a device, demographic and infrastructure that enable it to deliver an online service that meshes with the Nintendo gaming experience.

That concept of 'Nintendo-ness' was at the heart of the final stage of Iwata's show-and-tell. Even among an audience of industry insiders, there's still a great deal of scepticism and confusion around the DS, and just how it's going to deliver the new gaming experiences and new markets that Iwata is so dedicated to producing. The answer came in the shape of *Nintendogs* and *Electroplankton* (previewed on pages 35 and 41 respectively). *Nintendogs* was an instant hit, drawing sighs and coos from all quarters of the audience, despite some hiccups in the demo. Music experience *Electroplankton* received a more muted response, despite a virtuoso demonstration from NoA's Bill Trinen. It seems that until Nintendo itself demonstrates that a market for these kinds of interactive toys exists, much of the development community intends to reserve judgement.



Space was in such short supply this year that some exhibitors resorted to setting up mobile HQs. DemonWare's stretch Hummer drew stares and caused occasional tailbacks as it ferried delegates to and fro

The most important thing about these keynotes was that they were only two sessions out of dozens at the conference, and for many attendees they weren't the important events. The sessions that had the biggest impact were probably those given by developer's developer Will Wright (who unveiled his new project *Spore*, detailed on page 13) and about the game designer's game of the year, *Katamari Damacy* (creator Keita Takahashi's personal and emotional account of the game's genesis is transcribed on page 60). But it was the conference's other big hits that perhaps said the most about the mood of the community. Although there is always a substantial buzz around the Indie Game Jam and the Independent Games Festival, this year's darling was *Rag Doll Kung Fu*, an innovative and beautiful fight game designed by Mark Healey, an artist at Lionhead, in his spare time. There's more detail on the game on page 62, but there was no doubting how inspiring much of the audience found the sight of someone able to maintain such a high level of personal creativity and ambition while working full-time in the modern videogame industry.

As a final contrast to the feel-good vibes of the experimental games crowd, the single biggest cheer of the event was elicited by **Greg Costikyan**, who stood up before a packed house and declared to the global games industry: "My friends, we are fucked." The 'Developers' Rant' session (see page 61) touched on issues such as exploitative working practices and business models, the death of creativity and why everything's only going to get worse. It should have been the most depressing slot of the entire event, but there was a heady – and rowdy – sense of catharsis as delegates finally got to hear speakers talk publicly about the issues that concern them deeply in private. It was a long,

The single biggest cheer of the event was elicited by Greg Costikyan, who stood up to a packed house and declared to the industry: "My friends, we are fucked"



Keeping a large encampment of industry professionals fed and watered was a full-time job for the Moscone Convention Center, with each corridor complete with coffee supplies faintly reminiscent of the tables of water provided for exhausted marathon runners

long way from Microsoft's TV giveaway. For some, GDC has lost its way. Hideously expensive for those paying their own way (full passes to the event cost up to $1,975), it's no longer an event where specialists gather to talk shop. Ever-stricter NDAs put paid to many potentially illuminating sessions and developers at all levels are playing their cards ever closer to their chests. The focus is shifting to business deals, as more and more people flock to the event with no interest in attending the conference at all, instead taking advantage of the mass of industry people to get deals signed and pitches heard in the privacy of hotel suites. But for most, there's nothing else like it. Exhilarating and thought-provoking, this is one of the few chances the industry has to come together at an event that isn't about hawking its wares, and, as such, is immensely valuable.

Gizmondo hits ground spending

Tiger Telematics' portable multimedia device finally launches amid much splashing of cash



If nothing else, it was a nice day for it. The unseasonably hot weather on Saturday March 19 – the date of the long-delayed street launch for Tiger Telematics' portable multimedia device, the Gizmondo, and the opening of its dedicated flagship store at 175 Regent Street, London – was a sorely needed lucky break for the enterprise. Some of those involved will doubtless have interpreted the cloudless skies and blazing sun as a good omen, but in less superstitious terms, they meant that the capital was thronged with shoppers in an unusually relaxed and receptive mood.

Those curious enough to wander in past security, TV cameras and excited gaggles of executives and PRs found a smallish two-storey showroom that buzzed with activity. And wander in they did. The glossy finish (darkly mirroring the clinical white of Apple's nearby brand temple – no doubt a major inspiration), the huge 3D display and the thumping hip-hop being spun by waif-like DJs in the basement coffee bar drew a mixed crowd. Press and corporate guests mixed with chic geeks sampling the free wifi internet access, affluent tourists in late middle-age and small children clambering into the pod-like seating to try the games on offer. Many were genuine passers-by, which bodes well for the broad appeal of a device that seeks to be all things to all men. At lunchtime, the sales desk was doing an impressively brisk trade, considering the £230 price tag.

Perhaps this was just as well, because with distribution and retail deals yet to be finalised in the UK (chosen as the lead market for the British-based operation), this unlikely venue is currently the only shop in the world you can walk into and buy a Gizmondo. It's a permanent installation; more are planned, as well as Starbucks and Krispy Kreme franchises for the Regent Street lounge but, in the meantime, most machines will be bought from www.gizmondo.com. In any event, the true purpose of the store is to educate rather than sell.

The company is aware that GPS is both the Gizmondo's unique selling point and the justification for its high cost

On entering, a row of demo pods on the left-hand side introduces customers to the features of the surprisingly compact machine, one by one, and it's telling that the first of these highlights its GPS function. The company is well aware that it cannot compete with Sony and Nintendo head to head in the gaming marketplace – especially considering the extremely limited launch catalogue – just as it is aware that GPS is both the Gizmondo's unique selling point and the justification for its relatively high cost. Music, video, text messaging and email (via the non-contract-branded SIM card supplied with every machine), and a built-in camera of fair quality are next to be featured, proving that the first five letters of the Gizmondo's name are apposite: for now, the device is being aimed squarely at the technophile gadget market.

Plenty of units elsewhere in the shop were given over to games, to rather discouraging effect. Most featured the standout, and only standalone, title *Trailblazer*. The originally planned launch trio of *Super Drop Mania*, *Stuntcar Extreme* and *Angel Fish* from the Fathammer studio have been lumped together as *Fathammer Classics*, as if in embarrassed recognition of their technical simplicity and the poor quality of the latter two examples. These two releases were the only games on sale, both at £20. Playable demos of two key upcoming games – *Colors* and *Richard Burns Rally* – were available, but tucked away on the sole machine in the shop that gave full access to all of Gizmondo's features. Most customers won't see them, and some might argue that this was the idea.

Gizmondo plainly won't come to life as a gaming platform until the fruits of the purchase



For many visitors to the shop on its opening day, the free wifi access in the basement cafe proved a bigger draw than the demo pods elsewhere



Newswire

Sony faces legal rumblings

The long-running court case between Immersion and Sony, in which Sony stands accused of infringing Immersion's sensory feedback technology in its use of rumble on the DualShock pads, has concluded, and not in the way Sony would have wished. A Californian jury has found against the Japanese corporation, and awarded damages to Immersion that total $90.7 million. A permanent injunction has also been issued preventing the sale – and even the use – of PlayStation systems which include the DualShock, but this has been suspended during Sony's inevitable appeals, and it's highly unlikely it will ever come into force. Sony will also be required to pay quarterly licensing fees to Immersion for the use of its technology.

It's clear that Sony – unless it can get the decision reversed on appeal – miscalculated by taking the matter to court. Microsoft, when faced with similar accusations, settled out of court for just $26 million, which also netted the firm a ten per cent stake in Immersion. Nintendo was not included in Immersion's original suit as its external Rumble Pak was patented a year before Immersion's own technology emerged.







The celebrity presence was undeniably strong but inevitably, in places, their performance did more to communicate the size of the pay cheques they must have received, rather than any particular enthusiasm or awareness of the Gizmondo itself

of Warthog and the competition-spoiling collaboration with Microsoft Game Studios appear towards the end of 2005. Rolling footage on display gave some hope for this future. Of interest to attendees were two highly charismatic and original titles: the colourful lawnmower action game *Momma Can I Mow The Lawn?* and Warthog's *Furious Phil*, a cartoonish zombie shooter with appealing character art and visuals that seem far in advance of anything else currently running on the machine.

Gizmondo's resolve, imagination and nerve in opening this unique showpiece store in such a prestigious location are admirable. It's a fittingly bold and unusual strategy for a company that is wisely steering clear of its competition and choosing to plough its own furrow. For the most part it's a success, although its desperation to be noticed sometimes gets the better of it: the music's so loud you'll struggle to hold a conversation with the shop assistants, or judge the audio capabilities of the device.

The energy and deep pockets behind its promotion were also impressive, but perhaps more misguided. An astonishing parade of celebrities, including Dannii Minogue, Lennox Lewis and flavour of the decade Pharrell Williams (of NERD and the Neptunes) were on hand at the shop to lend the Gizmondo some much-needed name recognition, but none of them could do much to explain the strange little machine they were promoting; ultimately, they only distracted attention from it. All of them were present again, alongside Sting, Busta Rhymes and more, at a dazzling and crowded launch party that evening at the Park Lane Hotel, where the overwhelming assembled star power left the Gizmondo itself in the shade, its demo pods forlornly deserted for the duration. It was Jamiroquai's **Jay Kay** who hit the nail on the head: "We all know we're here for the launch of Gizmondo, don't we?" he asked his incredulous audience with a wry smile. You had to wonder.





The crisp blackness of the shop's interior left some curious passers-by blinking as they came in from the bright spring sunlight. The level-headed layout – 'I can play music' – did a better job of explaining the Gizmondo than its flashy TV adverts



ANNOUNCEMENT

Spore seeds more ambition

Will Wright unveils his latest, most ambitious project to date – and there's not a Sim in sight

Ever the maverick, *Sims* designer **Will Wright** of Maxis revealed his next title, *Spore*, with a surprise preview at last month's Game Developers Conference. Getting Sim Harry to meet Sim Sally is about the only kind of gameplay that doesn't get an outing in his new self-styled bacteria-to-galactic-god simulator; *The Sims* aside, *Spore* rolls multiple classics (*Pac-Man, Diablo, Sim City* and *Civilization*) into one hugely ambitious whole.

Spore is all about making a little go a long way. Players evolve a microbe in a 2D Petri dish-style view (that's the *Pac-Man* bit) into a 3D galaxy-travelling sentient race of beings (think meta-*Civilization*), via instantiations such as sea creatures, land-walkers, city-builders and warmongers. The code itself also focuses on compression and amplification; most of *Spore* is procedurally generated – the creatures, the cities they build, their weapons and vehicles and even the terraforming of distant planets.

Wright calls this a 'creativity amplifier'. The particular choices a player makes when evolving a creature totals about 1K of unique information, but Wright estimates that in algorithmically generating a creature from that 1K germ, *Spore* produces some 5Mb of data.

Wright recruited hacker/coders from the demo scene – who are used to working with code rather than graphics – to write the routines. But he's not done so for macho bragging rights alone. The flexible system – add extra-long limbs to a beast, say, and the game works out what it should look like and how it should walk – turns players into artists and designers. To Wright's mind, that's inherently more interesting than playing through someone else's vision.

Even more ambitiously, players will be able to swap the highly compressed data, representing creatures, cities or even planets, asynchronously via the internet, giving everyone a unique game and resulting in far more variation than Maxis could ever provide itself. It's a bold attempt to take mod culture to the mainstream, by making player content creation and propagation near-invisible.

At this early stage (Wright refuses to even discuss the game again until E3), *Spore* looks as if it's among the most ambitious titles ever attempted. Wright told fellow game developers that he hoped a shift towards procedurally generated content might offer an alternative to today's studio-crippling blockbusters. But he also believes it could act as a general wake-up call to a cowed creative community. Urging other developers to revisit older, ambitious ideas, Wright admitted: "The biggest obstacle I faced was believing we could build this game. My imagination was the bottleneck."

The rest of us will have to wait to play it.

SOUND BYTES

"Infinite crowds of monsters, decaliters of blood, kilograms of lead and tons of trotyl equivalent according to the glorious traditions of the first-person shooter genre."
It's all quantity over quality, admits the back cover of **Buka Entertainment**'s *Hellforces*

"Children are playing a game that encourages them to have sex with prostitutes and then murder them… This is a silent epidemic of media desensitisation that teaches kids it's OK to diss people because they are a woman, they're a different colour or they're from a different place."
Hilary Clinton calls for an investigation into the impact of videogames on children

"My first creation was a baseball game. I don't think anyone can say it had bad graphics because it had no graphics."
At GDC, Nintendo chief **Satoru Iwata** describes his first game, written for a pocket calculator – hopefully not a hint at what's going to make the forthcoming 'Revolution' so revolutionary

The game's devotion to touchscreen interaction extends to providing a small panel in the bottom right of the screen which can be scrubbed frantically to cause more blocks to fall



INTERVIEW

Shooting stars

The creator of 'ignition puzzle' Meteos explains the arithmetic processes behind fun and how he's attempted to bring life to the block puzzle

Masahiro Sakurai (right) made his name as a producer at HAL Laboratories, where he was responsible for the Kirby titles and *Super Smash Brothers Melee*. Resigning unexpectedly in 2003 to pursue a freelance career, Sakurai was recently contracted by Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Q? Entertainment to design DS puzzler *Meteos* (reviewed this month on p91).

Both of the initial Q? games have been falling-block puzzles released with new handheld hardware, just as *Tetris* was 15 years ago. What were the reasons for specifically creating this kind of game?
Mizuguchi-san called me up and asked to come up with a puzzle game right after I became a freelance game designer. I initially thought: 'Why a puzzle game now?' However, I also realised that it was this thought that was narrowing the fun of games these days. So I started to calculate the possibilities for a puzzle game and came up with the *Meteos* design. Well, as a freelance game designer, it is necessary for to me design to any genre of the games given to me!

You spoke last year at the Game Developers Conference about how elements such as characters, storyline, and a fully realised world provide a richer experience, and clearly that played a role in *Meteos*' development. Could you explain how these elements came together for *Meteos*?
I believe graphics, sound, game design and game balance should all come together as one, without jeopardising each other's theme. For example, for



the meteor called Layer Zero, I decided to use the electron as the main theme. So the residents of this meteor and background art became techno-themed. The sound followed the techno and became Eurobeat. Now, having the soundtrack as Eurobeat means the meteor must have an accelerated game speed. Once all the elements are there, it goes back to the start and round and round… until it becomes the perfect unison.

Many puzzle games use a fixed presentation, but both *Lumines* and *Meteos* use a variety of different, exciting skins. Do you think that's necessary to keep the player's attention?
I don't think using skins is important for that, but I did want to emphasise the variety among each meteor. All meteors are different to each other, and users can find the ones they like best. When the





The pace of *Meteos* is relentlessly, acceleratingly brutal. Unusually for a puzzle game, it makes progress highly dependent on motor skills – the stylus needs to be wielded with pinpoint precision to win

variety of meteors is the key to the product, the graphics and sound must have variety as well. So the changes in skins are part of a larger scheme. Please play head to head with different planets!

Meteos has been demonstrated at various public events over the past six months, such as Touch! DS, and with wireless downloads. Did you receive a lot of direct player feedback from the events?

Well, I did not have any time to receive user feedback, nor explore other ways with the game myself; I just aimed at the goal set at the start of the project. On the positive side, as a side effect of this I did manage to create the game as it was initially designed.

It's said that the _Meteos_ prototype took only one designer and one programmer three days to put together – is that correct?

You're close, but a little bit off! It was created by one designer, one graphic artist and one programmer, and took three days. Design documents were written by myself alone and took me three days to finish. When I designed *Meteos*, we didn't know it would be released on the DS platform. That was decided after we saw the hardware at E3, in May 2004. And at that stage, we didn't have a dev kit or any real hardware information.

"It was created by one designer, one graphic artist and one programmer, and took three days. Design documents were written by myself alone and took me three days to finish"

Lumines could be described as fusing a block puzzle with light and sound. How would you describe _Meteos_?



Sakurai has been successful in his bid to make each planet have a distinct identity – the combination of detailed backdrops, block design, soundscape and the design and minimalist animation of the planet's inhabitants communicating a great deal of character

It is called a 'shoot-up' puzzle in Japan, but I think it may be more fitting to call it 'ignition' in English. It is accomplished by many rules and logic, but the basic process is line up, ignite, and launch. And that process is addictive!

Mizuguchi has mentioned _Missile Command_ in relation to _Meteos_, and your GDC speech discussed _Space Invaders_ – how did these classic arcade games influence the game's development?

It's easy to analyse old games, as each element is simple. And I guess there are only a few games worth analysing the fun factor of lately. I aim to create calculated fun with my game designs.

You've talked about having to compete with a large number of free, simple internet games – what do you feel you must add to a puzzle game such as _Meteos_ to make it commercially viable, when so many alternatives are just a browser click away?

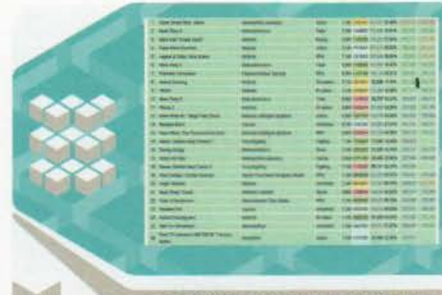
This is simple: make it more fun and complete. Now, games compete not only with other games, but also with film, TV, music, comics, magazines – all the forms of entertainment. The only choice between games and anything else the consumer can select is how fun it is. It doesn't matter whether it is a free internet game or otherwise: fun wins the user's heart.

Meteos is very different to a typical puzzle game, especially compared to a title like _Chokkan Hitofude_ (aka _Polarium_) on DS. Were you worried this difference might limit its audience, or do you think that moving beyond the boundaries of what we've seen before will reach more players?

Yes, I am very worried about this limitation. *Meteos* brings new sensations to the puzzle game format, but the typical Japanese consumer is very conservative. So *Meteos* faces big challenges against sequel products and character-based products. I believe games can be more fun, so I challenge myself to create new types of game to do that. So, if you like them, please purchase one.

How do you feel about the end result of _Meteos_? Are there aspects you didn't have time for that you would have liked to include?

There are tons of elements cut from the final version, and I am still not satisfied with the quality of the game. However, I am very happy to see users are enjoying it!



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Though the fanatical obsession with software sales numbers doesn't seem to be as prevalent on European gaming forums as their American and Japanese counterparts, should you need to bone up on your statistics – perhaps for some future Trivial Pursuit wedge – there's no better place than the fastidiously catalogued Shrine Of Data. Covering software line-ups from the N64 through to PlayStation Portable, it's a numerical Hot Or Not for the generation's software output, providing Japanese and, where appropriate, US sales figures to alternately send your jaw dropping or heart sinking. There are surprises to be found, too, among the western titles that made it big in Japan, and the staying power of some otherwise unassuming games.

Site:
Shrine Of Data
URL:
http://www5e.biglobe.ne.jp/~hokora/



SOLITAIRE-Y CONFINEMENT

With anti-game legislation on the rise in America (a charge led by a Florida attorney), and with Illinois representatives passing a bill making it a crime to sell videogames to minors, the North Carolina state government has found a new group of perpetrators to target: themselves. State senator Austin Allran has sponsored a bill to delete Microsoft's *Minesweeper* and *Solitaire* from 50,000 state employee's computers, claiming that if taxpayers knew how much gaming was done on state time, they would be "outraged." Should the bill make it into law, we'd be happy to recommend any number of alternatives to replace them with on the sly...

Newswire

eidos

Endgame for Eidos?

Once the clock started ticking on its dwindling cash reserves, it was inevitable that the bidding war for Eidos would finally reach critical mass. However, after accepting a bid from Elevation Partners, which valued the company at just over £70 million, the publisher's future has become even less certain. Regulations require that following such a deal, other companies which have been involved in the buy-out negotiations have a window of opportunity to present a counter offer, which Eidos is free to accept. The main contender to have emerged is SCi, which has offered a paper deal to Eidos stockholders, who would receive SCi shares instead of cash – but those shares initially make the deal worth three pence per share more than the Elevation offer, and news of the potential deal pushed SCi's stock even higher. Consequently, it looks likely that SCi – despite being a much smaller company – may be able to edge Elevation out. Schroder Investor Management has accepted the SCi bid on behalf of over 20 per cent of Eidos' shareholders, and the main barrier to the deal going through seems to be a question mark over SCi's ability to successfully integrate and manage a company so much larger than itself.



INTERVIEW

Onedotzero ramps up

A post-E3 slot for this year's event sees next-gen action lining up

Onedotzero will be holding its ninth festival of modern media and moving image design at the Institute Of Contemporary Arts, London, from May 27 until June 5... but why should gamers care? We spoke to the event's curator, **Elton McAleer** (above right).

What is the aim, nowadays, of onedotzero?
Over ten years, onedotzero has evolved into one of the world's premier forums for cutting-edge visuals across an increasingly broad field that encompasses film, animation, music and gaming.

Imagery, technique and style are not constrained by a particular discipline. Games have reached a point where they are on an equal footing with Hollywood and big-budget music videos, and are often the leading area for visuals and animation. We're seeing a move away from passive viewing, presenting the consumer with challenges, stimulation and new ways of influencing the virtual world around him. We aim to showcase the very best of this new imagery, and demonstrate that amazing visuals can be found across a wide spectrum of game types, not simply the big budget ones associated with fancy cut-scenes.

"PC and console hardware has now reached a point where often the most mind-blowing stuff is an all-out audiovisual, and even vibrational, assault on the screen and senses"

And why should Edge readers care about it?
Because onedotzero's Lensflare programme will be the first chance for most UK gamers to take in the spectacular visuals from many games currently still in development. It will also be a chance to talk to like-minded gamers and developers in a more intimate environment than some of the stadium-sized game shows.

You seem to be moving from a passive arrangement to something interactive, with demo pods – what's the thinking behind that?
In the past, the most stunning visual imagery in games has usually been prerendered FMV sequences that take place during breaks in actual gameplay. The PC and console hardware has now reached a point where often the most mind-blowing stuff is thrown at the player as an all-out audiovisual, and even vibrational, assault on the screen and senses. It's our aim to have playable code for some of the exclusive games featured in Lensflare running on demo pods, giving visitors a chance to get their palms sweaty and their heart racing. While Lensflare is not a gaming show, we understand that gamers without games are fish out of water.

What are you expecting to be the highlights?
We can't say too much, but we're confident that some of the next-generation footage in this year's Lensflare show will change the way many of our visitors think about gaming, whether they're casual gamers or hardcore enthusiasts.

We gather there's also a panel discussion planned – how is that going to work?
We hope to have a Q&A discussion session before or after at least one of the Lensflare screenings. The panel will be a lively mix of game journalists – we're inviting representatives from **Edge** – opinion formers and even a TV presenter or two. This will be a forum for gamers and non-gamers to dissect the Lensflare programme, debate the future of the art and to air their views on the state of play in the gaming world.



EVENT

Edinburgh festival gets interactive

The Edinburgh International Games Festival gets a new name and a new home



A scant three years old, its early days for the Edinburgh games festival to give up its status as new kid on the block, but last year's arrival of the Game Stars event in London has bumped it up the list. Now a familiar face instead of an unknown newcomer, the Scottish event – which runs from August 10 to 14 – has taken some steps to cement its place in the videogame industry calendar.

The first is a little unintuitive – a name change from the Edinburgh International Games Festival to the Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival. As well as the awkward acronym, the decision of the EIEF to drop the word 'games' from its title will be seen by some as an unfortunate unwillingness to stand by games as a valid cultural category, which surely undermines the whole purpose of taking videogames to the Edinburgh Festival to stand beside film, books, theatre and comedy. However, the organisers insist that the decision isn't about stepping away from games, but rather reflects the fact that "games are growing and our name change reflects the changing landscape within interactive entertainment." As yet, however, there is no word as to what forms of interactive entertainment other than videogames the festival will be addressing.

The name change extends to cover the conference section of the festival – Edinburgh Interactive – a two-day event featuring round-tables and presentations from speakers across all aspects of the videogame industry – development, publishing, government, marketing, education, academia – as well as from representatives of related industries.

Offering the chance to play a range of new and unreleased console and PC games for the price of a small entrance fee, it's a hard event not to enjoy

For the public, it's the screenings which for many will represent Edinburgh's biggest draw. Presented in a cinema-style setting, they should provide a chance to see exclusive content from upcoming games and hear developers give masterclasses in the techniques behind their best work. It's a rare enough opportunity in itself, and one that's usually only available solely at industry-only events like GDC.



The main conference is the only part of the festival which requires delegates to register – and pay an attendance fee. Early birds can get a moderate discount at the EIEF website

Also making a return is the popular Go Play Games event. Offering the chance to play a range of new and unreleased console and PC games for the price of a small entrance fee, it's a hard event not to enjoy. Last year, these three events were split across Edinburgh; this year they're all located within the Edinburgh International Conference Centre, meaning that people can flow from one part of the event to another. But, even with the infrastructure soundly in place, the festival's success will depend largely on the quality of the speakers and the range of screenings they can secure – the organisers will be confirming details on the festival's website (www.eief.co.uk) in the coming months.

This year's event will also host the third Edinburgh Festival **Edge** Award. Voted for both by a panel of judges drawn from across the games industry and by **Edge** readers and festival goers, it's an award designed to reward innovation and excellence, not popularity or commercial success. The shortlisted games, members of the panel and details for public voting will be available soon (via www.edge-online.com).





Last year's Go Play Games was held in the Royal Museum – a slightly odd mix which brought some unsuspecting natural history buffs into their first contact with videogames. This year, all three aspects of the event will be centralised in the main conference centre

INTERVIEW

The death of a salesman and the life of a zombie

How do you follow up a game as widely respected as Halo? By killing your hero, of course. And then tearing off his arm

Alex Seropian, Bungie founder and executive producer of *Halo*, left the company to found his own studio, Wideload. There, with fewer than a dozen colleagues, he's working on a new twist on the zombie game (*Stubbs The Zombie* is previewed on page 34) and a new take on studio management.

***Stubbs The Zombie* is a game starring a character from the 1930s, set in a vision of the future inspired by the retro chic of the 1950s. What were the reasons behind such an ambitious design choice?**

You make it sound so complicated! [Laughs.] The idea behind *Stubbs* – the 30-second pitch – is that it's the zombie film where we flip things around, where you're the zombie. And you're not just eating brains, you're destroying a whole city, and so we wanted it to be a place that was fun to destroy. It had to be... perfect, it had to be the kind of perfect that's annoying and cloying. It is a city of the future, but the guy who built it made his billions out of inventing robots, technology to make your life easier, and it fits in really well with '50s Americana. When families were getting their refrigerators and their TVs and they were automating their lives and there was this idealistic view of the future – everybody wasn't happy, but everyone *looked* happy, you know? So it's like when you want to smack the smile off that person with that silly grin on their face.

"The character was summed up with the idea 'loser in life, winner in death'. So he was just a loser. He could have been a high-school kid, or someone who's just mad at the world"

Stubbs himself is a character with a lot of visual humour. Where did his characterisation as a downtrodden, Depression-era salesman come from?

Really early on the character was summed up with the idea 'loser in life, winner in death'. So he was just a loser. He could have been a high-school kid, or someone who's just mad at the world, down-trodden, someone who never got anywhere, but when he comes back as the zombie he's got all these powers that nobody else does so he's kind of the superhero. And that was the high concept. So as we started developing the concept, and we did want it to be in this kind of perfect world, so we already knew we wanted to use the kind of 1950s Americana for that, so as we started to think about character – and we spent a good year working on backstory and his physical features, the hat, the cigarette, the whole thing, we just continuously honed it.

So a failed salesman is out to destroy the creature-comfort obsessed paradise of middle America. Are you trying to make any political points with the game?

[Laughs.] Not overtly! We'll just leave that as an exercise for the reader...

Stubbs himself is another big design challenge. How do you go about making an appealing main character who is essentially a corpse?

Well, there were a bunch of ideas that didn't work, and a bunch that did. The first thing was that we wanted him to run, because we didn't want the game to be too slow. And we wanted to be able to recognise him in silhouette, which is where the hat and the cigarette and the gaping wound and the boxer shorts came from – all part of the look. And we spent a lot of time working on the skin. Because there's a lot of different ways you can do zombies, and we didn't want people to look at him and go: 'Bleeugh, I don't want to be that guy'. So if you look at him and see his posture, you'll immediately go: 'Zombie!' but we just made his skin a kind of green – a little like Shrek – going for that loveable monster look.

Without asking for any spoilers, how do you come up with a satisfactory ending for a game where the main character is dead and his only goal is to destroy the world?

[Laughs.] Well, it's a love story. It is! And there's a reason why he came back as a zombie – it wasn't just dumb luck. And the place where he is, and the people he meets, all mean something to him and to each other. You don't know anything at the beginning – all you know is that you've popped out of the ground and you're *hungry*.

Alex Seropian, a veteran of big business as well as the days of real bedroom startups, is well placed to assess the future of how independent studios will have to manage themselves





The game's muted stylings initially disguise the strength and beauty of its overall production design, which ranges from the simplicity of small-town America to the full-scale 1950s kitsch



But as the game progresses, the story is told to you through the characters you meet, and flashbacks and the story will fill itself in. And it is a story about Stubbs – it's about the loser becoming a hero.

Although Stubbs can't use a gun, he can detach his hand and use it to possess people and take control of their weapons. What was the impetus for that decision? Did you feel that it would be impossible to release an action game without guns?

Well, sort of. We were pretty convinced that if players were running around and they saw some guy with a bazooka shooting at them, they're going to say: 'I want to do that!' and we didn't want to not let them. So that was the biggest motivation. But it works pretty well, because it means that every enemy in the game matters. If you kill them they become a teammate; if you possess them you can use their weapon. And since we're using the *Halo* engine, and there's lots of things that the code does really well and it would kind of be a shame not to use them – like the aiming system, and the weapons are a good opportunity to exploit the physics effects.

Wideload is organised around an unusual system – a small core team that relies on outsourcing for much of the development work. How did that format come about?

I'd been thinking for a long time about what has been difficult for developers. I'd been independent with Bungie, but we'd also been part of Microsoft, so I'd had a lot of exposure to their publishing business. So I'd seen the process from both sides of the fence, and it was sort of scary. One thing that I saw a lot of was developers who got their funding from publishers, and upfront they'd be put in the situation where they have to say: 'This is how long it's going to take them, here's how much I'm going to need, here's when I'll need it and here's the date for each milestone'. It's great to do that kind of planning, but how often can you be 100 per cent on that? And more often that not what I was seeing was developers living month to month, because games are sometimes unpredictable; what happens if a publisher decided not to make a payment because they weren't happy about something, or they wanted to use it as leverage to get them to make a demo or whatever? Those questions were terrifying to me. But the model that we came up with solves that.

Isn't there a risk you end up with lower quality because you just get work-for-hire instead of dedicated team members?

What it comes down to is the quality of games is directly related to the people who work on them – and the tools, the tools help – but it's hiring great people. And where it works in our advantage is that it's easy for us to hire people and it's easy for us to fire people. Not to sound too callous, but it's a business relationship. It's not a personal commitment, where you hire someone to come on staff and you want to make an investment and it's a long-term relationship, even if they're not working out.

There's a lot of focus on quality of life within development studios at the moment. What difference does the Wideload model make?

For our studio it's a tremendous win, because the way our process works is that we do a lot of design work upfront, and then we send assets out to get built – and if we need five extra people to get something done, we can bring in five extra people. What works in our favour is that a lot of the bulk production work isn't done inside our office, so when those people are motivated to work longer hours to get something done that isn't happening in our office, so there's no peer pressure to 'stick around for dinner!' and you end up surfing the internet for three hours. That happens more that you'd think.

OUT THERE



HALOES FOR HALO

Furthering evidence of gaming culture's now inextricable ties to culture at large, eTeam Revolution, a Dare 2 Share ministry, has posted an article on the web this month pointing toward *Halo 2*'s overwhelming popularity as an 'awesome opportunity to take something hugely popular in our culture and turn it into a way to share the most important message in the universe with your friends who don't have a relationship with God'. 'How To Witness Using *Halo 2*' makes the case that *Halo 2*'s storyline, with its remarkably biblical overtones, can be used as a jumping-off point in talking about one's faith, and that, utilising the power of Xbox Live while 'blasting aliens with some guy in England', a player can be 'doing overseas missions work while sitting in your boxers on the sofa. How cool is that?'

• www.eteamrevolution.net

DEAL

Sega gets Creative

Sega continues its western push with the purchase of The Creative Assembly and a deal with Silicon Knights

Shadow The Hedgehog appears to have certain things in common with *Sonic Adventure*. And lots of gunplay, weirdly

The Creative Assembly has long made it plain that it has had a development team at work on a secret project but, when it was announced, the biggest surprise wasn't that it was a console game, but that it was to be published by Sega. *Spartan: Total Warriors* (GC, PS2, Xbox) is intended to bring the epic scale of the *Total War* strategy series down to a human level, giving the player direct control of an individual soldier.

The following day in March, the news was announced that Sega had bought the entire company. The Creative Assembly was a standard bearer of independent UK development, funding itself through a carefully staggered production cycle and deals with TV companies for shows based on its technology. The news of Sega's buyout will be treated by some as testimony to the desirability of the company, and by others as evidence of the current near-impossibility of survival as an independent development house.

The move is part of Sega's current march to broaden its portfolio to include more games developed in the west. Another recent announcement was a deal between Sega and US developer Silicon Knights, which had previously excused itself from an exclusive relationship with Nintendo, to develop a new franchise for next-generation machines. Also indicative of Sega's desire to appeal to a wider demographic is news of *Shadow The Hedgehog* (above). A multiplatform title due for release sometime this winter, it features the spin-off character from the *Sonic* series in a gun-toting adventure that may well alienate traditional fans of the game in the process of attracting new blood.

Continue

Handheld hackery
From QD emus to PSP, the scene is alive and kicking

Beamable DS software
We can't get enough, so please keep making it

Freezepop
At the best of GDC's parties. *Frequency* live!

Quit

EA's planning at GDC
Re-run of Wright on *Spore* is killed; hundreds mope

Game Zone Live
And just when it looked like it was shaping up

'In my opinion...'
Yes, that's the point of a review. So stop saying it



Author: Kazuo Ishiguro
Publisher: Faber
isbn: 0 571 22411 3

NEVER LET ME GO

A new novel and a new genre from the author of The Remains Of The Day

Demonstrating the sensitive antennae of some writers, Never Let Me Go marks another award-winning author taking on a subject that could be viewed as playing on the boundaries of science fiction. And like Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake, Never Let Me Go has a much more serious side too. In no way thinly disguised (or written), at heart this is a morality tale based around the interaction of the new wave of medical technology with an increasingly self-centred and short-sighted society. Set in a loosely alternative version of England, in which transplant technology boomed after the end of the second world war, it concerns the growing pains of a group of children within an idyllic prep school. Encouraged to be creative, nevertheless they grow up in an isolated environment. There's little contact with the outside world, with the exception of the mysterious Madame who comes to choose the best pieces of artwork for purposes unknown. More rumours start to swirl when one of the children's favourite teachers, Miss Lucy, suddenly vanishes after confused outbursts. But it's not until they leave and gain contact with wider society that they really start to understand the details of their preordained role in life. There's an almost continuous sense of dread as the expected denouement comes to pass. The tale is retold in retrospect from the perspective of Kath H, one of the children, who's now turned 31. Never Let Me Go is probably the most prescient book you'll read all year.



Author: Richard Morgan
Publisher: Gollancz
isbn: 0 575 07325 X

WOKEN FURIES

If you were 300 years old and being stalked by your younger self, you'd be furious too

A third outing for Richard Morgan's antihero Takeshi Kovacs, Woken Furies marks something of a consolidation point both for the hard-bitten ex-special forces operative and the calculating heavy metal-noir environment he inhabits. Back on his home planet, Kovacs is drifting literally and metaphysically. Now over 300 years old, thanks to technology that allows you to back up your consciousness and re-sleeve it in new flesh, he's swapped the will to live for a bloody and ultimately mindless vendetta against the religious extremists who eliminated the only woman he may have loved. It's this bloodlust that gets him into more trouble when a barroom massacre ends up in the torching of the nephew of well-connected local yakuza. To avoid the heat, he hitches up with a squad of freelance operatives who are cleaning up the badlands of sentient war machines left over from the last doctrinal civil war. But the past is never buried, especially in a setting where people can be backed up, and soon Kovacs is having to seriously consider the depth of his ambivalence to life; not least because someone's hired a century-younger backup Kovacs to assassinate him. In between the staccato rhythm of truncated action-packed chapters, it's this aspect of Woken Furies that proves most disappointing. What should have been a crucial character-deepening opportunity is lost in the maelstrom of plasmafrag rifle fire, neurachem enhancements and alien constructs. Despite all his other enemies, it seems Kovacs' biggest danger is becoming a cipher.



A DEVELOPER'S DIARY

Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniades continues his next-gen push

It's now August 2004. Our parent company is in financial turmoil and we have been going it alone without publisher funding for well over a year. Companies are collapsing left, right and centre; redundancies are happening everywhere; one of Argonaut's subsidiaries, LT Studios, has been shut down. Despite having an impressive next-gen demo of *Heavenly Sword*, our publisher options are in disarray.

So, despite all the unknowns, we continue to wrestle with preproduction. What middleware should we use, at what level, and for what areas? Do we use off-the-shelf tools, write our own, or use Argonaut's? How do you capture human performance into a game? Can we outsource tasks and to whom?

An amazing amount of time and effort is spent answering these and a hundred other questions. It soon becomes apparent that only a good core team of experienced people can get through this maze of options and dead-ends. It's pretty hellish.

Meanwhile, a large publisher approaches us again: "When we first saw *Heavenly Sword*, we weren't sure whether it was next gen. After seeing many pitches and demos, we now realise it really is." Another publisher comes forward wanting us to form a key part of their next-gen announcement strategy. Finally, a new publisher sees the game for the first time and wants in. Contracts fly back and forth and once again, we are on the brink of signing. And guess what happens next?

Finally, a new publisher sees the game and wants in. Contracts fly back and forth and once again, we are on the brink of signing. And guess what happens next?

October 15. Nina gets the call from Argonaut. They've run out of cash. Shares in Argonaut are being suspended and half of their staff have just been let go. We inform the team, who look dejected and mortified. We go to the pub. On return, I sit in front of my monitor trying to get back to work but just can't focus. It sickens me to think that all the work we have done could go to waste and that my colleagues could be left jobless.

I call Nina and Mike into a meeting room. If we don't make October's pay cheque, we would lose staff and it would be game over. We need to raise enough money to buy back the company. We raid our savings and start remortgaging our houses to raise some money, but we need a lot more capital than that. While Mike and I tackle the task of keeping the team focused, Nina does a Gandalf and rushes around to see accountants, lawyers, agents, investors, venture capitalists and banks for advice and investment.

October 19. The administrator informs us that all of Argonaut's subsidiaries will be auctioned off or closed down by October 25. We have less than four working days remaining to raise the money we need.

October 20. The administrator starts auctioning us off to major and minor publishers and developers. Having our assets paraded like a cheap whore to a bunch of predators is not pleasant.

October 22. We sign the papers that officially put Just Add Monsters into administration. It is a very sad day for us, made worse by the fact that Argonaut Sheffield (formerly Particle Systems) is closed down that morning with an additional 50 people being let go. It is a Friday and the deadline for bidding is on Monday.

October 23-24. We approach Jez San over the weekend and hammer out terms. We have at least one other serious investor interested, but in such a vulnerable position under such tight time constraints, it has to come down to trust and Jez has never let us down before.

October 25. The bid is made and all we can do now is wait. We are informed that several parties have put in bids. We are terrified that a publisher will out-bid us and take us over.

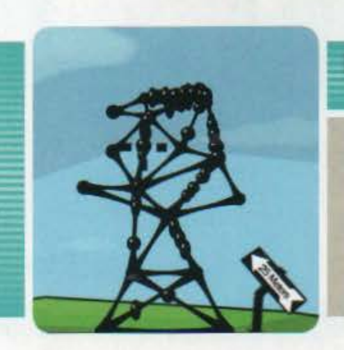
October 29. We are told that our bid is successful. We are officially independent again! We have all put our own money in, making Mike, Nina, Jez and myself the directors of Ninja Theory with Jez taking a back-seat role allowing us three to sail the new ship into the future.

November 1. The remainder of the staff at Argonaut, one of largest and oldest videogame developers around, are let go, marking the end of an era for British development.

Still no publishing deal and everything we own is on the line, but at least we get a fighting chance. And best of all, everyone at the company stayed on board throughout this. Thanks!



Three old concepts for the lead character, showing what happens when you're being pulled by publishers in different directions. In the end, Ninja Theory did what it felt was right, discarding them



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

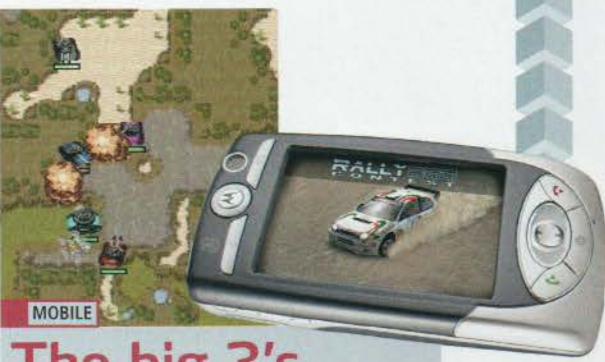
Tower Of Goo

www.experimentalgameplay.com

With the announcement of Ageia's PhysX processing unit and developers scrambling over one other to outdo each others' soft-body dynamics and particle systems, physics is gaming's 'it girl' right now. There's something undeniably gratifying in seeing in-game elements consistently following tacit laws, which is a large part of what makes *Tower Of Goo* so good.

Part of Carnegie Mellon's Experimental Gameplay Project, in which four people each attempt to create at least one new game each week, *Tower Of Goo* is currently designer Kyle Gabler's most successful effort. It's *Pontifex* with a soul, where anthropomorphic blobs file along a wireframe structure and can be cemented as joints and girders to build the tower.

But beyond the mere physical fun, it's the yips and cheers of the blobs themselves as they reach new heights that make the game so hard to quit, and which, along with the cheery atmosphere and unconventional bandoneon tango loop, show a level of polish and confidence that seem to belie its accelerated development cycle.



MOBILE

The big 3's gaming plans

Multiplayer and near-console-quality games arrive on mobiles

Mobile phone giant 3 has launched two gaming initiatives, with promises to deliver realtime, over-the-air, multiplayer gaming for its 3G customers. Latency over GPRS can be up to 30 seconds – too slow for anything other than turn-based multiplayer gaming – but 3G reduces this to fractions of a second.

No Refuge (above), a fourplayer tank battler, is the launch title, followed by an enhanced version of *Cannons Tournament*, the *Worms*-style, turn-based battle strategy title. The games will be available on a pay-per-play basis, at 50p a go. While most operators charge between £3 and £5 to allow gamers to download and keep each game, 3's games manager, **Oscar Clark**, feels the pay-per-play model opens the experience up to a wider audience: "Consumer commitment to each game is much lower, plus we don't charge for data traffic. As a result, we're acquiring a range of people who wouldn't be heavy gamers."

Connected gaming specialist Terraplay is 3's technology partner; its MOVE service promises an integrated multiplayer solution for games publishers, including gateways, lobby and tournament functionality. At the moment, 3 is offering a simple lobby service, with users creating a game and inviting friends – there are no public servers. Clark expects to develop these as customers gain more experience.

The company has also adopted Synergenix's mobile gaming platform, Mophun, to deliver a range of 3D titles. As Clark explains: "Mophun allows a single game file to run on multiple platforms – Java demands multiple rewrites. Plus, Java's 3D engine is currently not powerful enough to meet our requirements."

Launch games *Lock 'n' Load*, an FPS, and *Rally Pro Contest* show promise, delivering 3D performance reminiscent of *Quake*-era PC titles. Both should sport multiplayer support within the next few months.

If 3 can encourage developers to support Terraplay and Mophun, it may become *the* carrier choice for mobile gamers.

INCOMING

Announcements and updates

Spartan: Total Warrior

FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: SEGA
EXPECTED: SEPTEMBER 2005



A new direction for The Creative Assembly, as its army-marshalling expertise marches on to console. While the scale largely survives, only the titular warrior will be directly playable

Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: ATARI
EXPECTED: SUMMER



Rhinos are out, wheat paste and stencils are in. Marc Ecko's eulogy to graffiti culture is light on the ego, but rich with enthusiasm for the art of painting your name in impossible places

Soul Calibur 3

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: NAMCO
EXPECTED: 2005



It's a straight-to-console – and currently only Sony's console – release for *SC3*, with a corresponding emphasis on a clutch of original play modes, including custom character creation

Hellgate: London

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: NAMCO
EXPECTED: 2006



The now-independent creator of the *Diablo* games finally reveals its new multiplayer dungeon crawl: the surprises include a firstperson perspective and a very local dark future

The Matrix: Path Of Neo

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX
PUBLISHER: ATARI
EXPECTED: Q4 2005



A remarkable picture of modesty and humility, Dave Perry has pointed himself and Shiny in the right direction with a seemingly more inventive, capable and faithful return to The Matrix

Fable: The Lost Chapters

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
EXPECTED: AUTUMN



The rumoured *Fable 1.5* surfaces on PC, intimating that perhaps if not all of the Xbox version's obviously pulled pages will be reinstated, then at least some of the loose ends can be tied up



Weekly Famitsu's cover artist Susumu Matsushita's style will be familiar to *Maximo* fans – and owners of E108, of course



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan



Enterbrain reborn

Famitsu PS2 magazine's Koji Aizawa hails Japan's hits and explains its game mag scene

In Japan, there are two key moments in the year for game sales. One is of course December, with the huge sales at the end of the month coinciding with the new year. The second is March, and in fact this date is far more important for developers and publishers, rather than players. The year for companies and schools begins in April, so the videogame industry is trying to get every sale it can, right up until the last moment. This means there are also games released up to the very last moment, and there are tons of them coming on to the market. The consequence is that gamers face a second avalanche of titles only a couple of months after the new year.

Last year, the publishers realised they were too focused on this March release date, so they have tried to release their games in January or February to give them a better chance of selling. This time, in January we had *Biohazard 4*, Tri-Ace's new *Radiata Stories*, the mecha all-stars title *Another Century's Episode* and *Monster Hunter G*. In February, we had more with *Devil May Cry 3*, *Shin Sangokumuso* (*Dynasty Warriors*) *4*, *Dragonball Z3* and *Rumble Roses*. Spreading out these releases worked well – Bandai's *Dragonball Z3* on PS2 has already sold more than 500,000 copies. Of course the name value is a big part of the game's success, and proves it is still very strong in Japan, even after all these years. Koei's *Shin Sangokumuso 4* also reached the 500,000 mark. It's incredible how popular this series is in Japan. I mean, after ten versions, it is still selling that many in the face of strong competition from other developers. And, like the previous versions, I expect this fourth instalment should sell a million copies.

Anyway, this leaves March with two major titles on PS2: *Wild Arms: The Fourth Detonator* and *Tekken 5*. They will face the very original *Meteos* on the DS and *Fable* on Xbox. I know these two PS2 hits should not have much to fear from these two competitors, but personally I love these two challengers and I would like them to perform well. But there is other big news in the industry. It is not about the actual games themselves, but still very much about videogaming.

The videogame industry is trying to get every sale it can, right up until the last moment. This means there are also games released also up to the very last moment, and there are tons of them coming on to the market

Let me talk to you about the Japanese videogame press industry. The Japanese games industry is divided into two groups. One is small and concerns the PC gaming market, while the second is huge and supports the home consoles. So it is not surprising that most of the magazines are based on home console gaming. In my group, Enterbrain, you find Weekly Famitsu, PS2, Cube, Xbox and Wave (DVD). There are other magazines besides, but those are the big ones. Then there are the other publishing groups like Mediaworks with the Dengeki family of magazines (mainly PS2 and GC), Softbank with Dorimaga, and Mainichi Communication with Nintendo Dream.

***Fable* (below) recieved an enthusiastic response from Japanese magazine reviewers, aptly so given that the final product wasn't as far removed from traditional console RPGs as had been touted**

An aggressive cover from Famitsu Cube, seldom required to compete on the more typical attention-grabbing field of angry young rendered men – except where Leon Kennedy is concerned

The number one is our Weekly Famitsu, and the magazine I'm in charge of, Famitsu PS2, is number three. Now, Enterbrain was bought last year by Kadokawa Holdings – a huge publishing company in Japan. I have to admit this created a strange feeling in me. I'll try to give you a few insights into our history. Enterbrain was originally a portion of a press group named ASCII. It became independent in 2000, but a strong relationship still remains between both groups. ASCII is focused on computers with a wide range of magazines. Enterbrain is about home consoles. ASCII and Enterbrain are both part of a wider group called CSK, once the parent company of Sega.

And now we are part of the Kadokawa Holdings group. The irony is that under Kadokawa, Enterbrain sits beside its main competitor, the Mediaworks press group. I'd say now Kadokawa controls 90 per cent of Japan's videogame press market, about 70 per cent for Enterbrain and the remaining 20 per cent for Mediaworks. While many thought we would have to merge our resources and competences, Kadokawa let us remain independent as we were before, so we are still fighting hard. OK, we sometimes work together with Mediaworks magazines but most of the time we remain competitors, and each magazine is trying to deliver the best so their readers will be fully satisfied, as before. This may look a little bit strange from an US or European point of view – but this is quite common in Japan and such things have happened in the past. So, I hope that's given you a little insight into the Japanese videogame press!



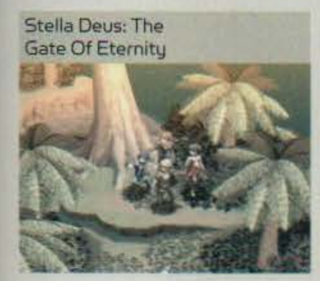
***Rumble Roses* received prominent cover mileage on its release, though it can't challenge the staggering volume of Famitsu Xbox's *DOA* obsession**

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Stella Deus: The Gate Of Eternity



It's a strange sensation to be anticipating a 2D strategy-RPG that *isn't* developed by Nippon Ichi, but *Stella Deus'* credentials, and visuals, speak for themselves.
PS2, ATLUS

Okami



It's still hard to believe it's real, the delicacy and fluidity of the art a total contrast to the brash brutality which makes up the huge majority of most modern videogames.
PS2, CAPCOM

Psychonauts



It may not have had an easy time, but one of the benefits of *Psychonauts'* troubled ride is that its appeal hasn't been dissected and neutered by endless previews.
PS2, XBOX, MAJESCO

Jack Spratt's wife

Why marketing men need to eat more lean



GT4's TV advert – though no doubt extremely expensive – is the kind of intelligent, imaginative and targeted marketing that is still shockingly rare in the videogame industry

If there was one thing that dominated GDC this year, it was a sense of growing unease about the economics of the next generation. Developers are more and more aware that they'll need to play it smart to survive – cutting costs without cutting corners, justifying ever-growing team sizes by sharing their work across projects, or finding alternative sources of revenue from government or television.

But why bother? For major titles, it's now routine for the cost of marketing to substantially outstrip the cost of development. The industry is focusing its attention on keeping costs down in an area which is already often tightly constrained, with designers having to strike features off their wishlists. Meanwhile, marketing costs are ballooning. Activision announced a policy last year of cancelling any title it wasn't willing to back with major, mainstream press and TV advertising, and decisions like that aren't cheap to make. As a consequence, it becomes a pressing matter for the consumer. Publishers are almost universally united in their desire to see a return, come the next generation, to games priced at £50 or even £60. Their theory goes that it's a fair shift: the power of next-gen machines will mean gamers will get more bang for more bucks. Problem is, for many titles, most of your bucks will actually be buying you more marketing.

There's no question marketing is effective. There's no question it's desirable. On the whole, this industry needs more – especially if it can be directed at more creative titles that can't explain themselves in bullet points on the back of a box. But at a time when game makers themselves are being put under pressure to think smart and to reinvent the way they structure their projects, it's striking there's no similar detectable pressure on the other half of the balance sheet.

TV ads for games, particularly in Europe, are mostly dismal. Grubby footage, identikit voiceovers and dodgy CGI are commonplace. Box art is staggeringly conservative, as variations on gurning-man-with-gun dominate the shelves. Flash-heavy websites and stubborn, distracting pop-ups alienate as many as they convince. Game makers are being asked to do more and cap costs at the same time. Shouldn't marketeers be asked the same?











FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **CHUNSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **APRIL 29 (JAPAN)**

Homeland

Chunsoft's 'holding hands' online RPG offers a boost for GameCube holders and touchy-feely adventurers the world over





The trinket box – kept in your character's 'real world' bedroom – contains mini figures representing each of the Quester guises you can take on and ingrain with experience while adventuring



Homeland's graphics are smooth and appear stylistically understated, but the mix of locations and variety within them is enough to keep you interested. However, the 'scrolling backdrop' nature of locations makes them quite static

Making it on to the exclusive team allowed to beta test an online title is frequently a thrill, and nothing could be more exclusive than a networked RPG designed solely for GameCube. *Homeland* knows quite a bit about exclusivity, only recently resurrected from development hell with a constrictive caveat: the title would only be sold via developer Chunsoft's website. Those that purchased early would also get into a yet more exclusive club – the beta test.

Both the online and offline adventures are included in the trial disc, and the *Homeland* hallmark of exclusive invitations doesn't end when you open the box. The opening movie sees your youthful character awake from an afternoon nap to discover a guardian angel opening a welcoming portal to another world that only they can enter.

From here, the start is a little underwhelming. Initial reactions are that *Homeland* is fairly generic adventure material. Taking the role of a 'Quester', you're invited to move from a hubworld to other lands in order to question villagers, solve quests and fight monsters. Progression unlocks different Quester guises which you can adopt and level-up. The turn-based combat is relatively simple, with single commands for attack, while the in-game menus appear as an easily selectable circle of commands around your avatar.

Homeland begins to bust out of its stereotypical trappings once the action widens in scope. Characters you build up can be summoned into the game world (providing you're of the relevant proficiency to do so) and you then chain these characters and NPCs together by holding hands to combine powers and tackle bigger situations. The more people linked, the more powerful the group becomes. One example uses the group to muster enough breath to blow a blocking object out of the way, the combined airflow being more useful than one single puff. Taking the hand of a weaker or wounded ally will also help protect him, and locking palms with certain characters helps gain their special properties; taking the hand of a fire character allows the hero to walk across magma, for instance.

Your Quester's progress revolves around a traditional level-up/experience chain, but one that is particularly well scaled – you feel steadily powerful after just an hour's exploration, engaging in combat and judicial uses of energy-topping spells or potions. In fact, the sense of power is ramped so well that enemies that were once best avoided soon feel the same way about you, scampering away in fear. Consequently, killing weaker enemies feels all the more opportunistic and underhand; cornering a defenceless foe becomes a guilty pleasure, especially when the reward is a single-digit experience point and the animation makes them so sympathetic.

Speaking of which: it was the game's aesthetics that caught much attention back when it was announced just over a year ago, and they remain enchanting onscreen. Action



Black (and white) box

Financing the production run for *Homeland*'s beta trial has demanded not just one run of discs, but two. So Chunsoft has gone lo-fi for first-wave trial discs, printing the beta disc box and manual in black and white. You'd be forgiven for considering it minimalism in line with the graphics – it's just a polite, cost-cutting reminder that this is just the preliminary demo version.





Holding hands is the game's main, unique device, putting players into a chain of people to increase power. It's a simple device quickly activated with a press of the right trigger





is framed similarly to other GameCube titles *Animal Crossing* and *Giftpia* and, whether intentionally or not, the stylised graphics share a striking similarity to both *Wind Waker*'s smooth cel-shading and Tove Janson's Moomin illustrations. Visuals are streamlined and simple but deliberately so, a concession to ensure the game works efficiently online.

Which is, of course, where much of the game is designed to come together. Our online tests proved a little mixed, though. Connection and configuration issues are typical teething problems for any MMO or online console game, although the bare-bones nature of the GameCube's networking function seems to amplify this. As such, we've been unable to test the 'Play God' mode, which lets you set up your own server for an adventure from your own GC. Joining other servers in the 'Play Adventure' mode worked smoothly and quickly, however, although rather annoyingly you may appear on the other side of the world, meaning you'll have to wait or catch up with other players.

This kind of illogical logic damages the combat/handholding mechanic when online. As a team, the player leading the chain does all the work; you're just along for the ride. And while it can certainly be compelling to watch this take place live onscreen and reap experience point benefits at little cost, it isn't very involving. Whoever leads will get bonus points for actually doing the hard work, but this means some will master *Homeland* quite quickly while others are left languishing. That online games customarily leave newcomers feeling inadequate is one thing, that this particular one seems to encourage it is quite another. *Homeland* may raise its game when played socially with people you know, but for now it's more a case of excluding than exclusive.

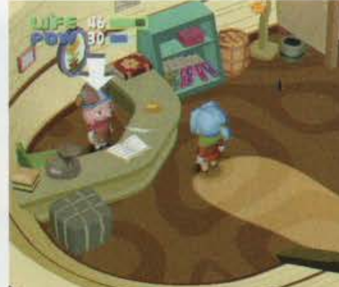
Such an imbalance is something that could be ironed out once the testing phase is over, and perhaps it would be better implemented if players were only allowed to lead the gang for a set period of time. (Although at this stage it's improbable that *Homeland*'s development schedule has leeway for such modifications – the first copies of the game will be rolling out of the pressing plant by the time you read this.)

What's more worrying is the question of *Homeland*'s relevance. Whereas it's possible to lose a weekend in *World Of WarCraft* purely wandering, *Homeland* is a traditional RPG given a bit of spice thanks to its online functions. From what we've seen, it's strictly tied to the thrill of completing some rather similar-feeling quests – not quite fulfilling Chunsoft's intentions to make something innovative and unique for the Cube. While a playtest of the full version in future months may prove this wrong, for now it seems that, with a western release almost entirely off the cards, the exclusivity to be had from playing one of the few online games for an under-supported machine may be its only real distinguishing feature.











When joined in a line and holding hands, teams automatically combine powers and attacks – and can protect weaker players by incorporating them into the crowd (above). At the start of the game you can choose if your character is male or female (left) – your gender, however, seems to have no real impact on the Quester you play as, being just an opportunity to impress your personality on to the avatar

> As a team, the player leading the chain does all the work; you're just along for the ride. And while it can certainly be compelling, it isn't very involving



FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **RARE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **APRIL 29**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E145**



Conker: Live And Reloaded

Several bad fur years later, the alcoholic psychopath develops schizophrenia, as Conker becomes a Live wire as well as a woolly jumper

It feels almost suitably perverse that Rare's biggest – and perhaps last – Xbox title is one that, in its original guise at least, commanded only cult appeal. For a game so concerned with subverting clichés with an eye to uninhibited childishness, it seems fitting that the first truly high-profile produce of Microsoft's legendary purchase of the renowned developer is a game fixated with overthrowing norms at the expense of deep or ambitious play. But, with *Conker: Live and Reloaded* being more than just a direct update of the N64 original, it's just not as simple as that. The package on offer is boosted by an attractive and substantial Live mode, while the solo campaign – Conker's controversial *Bad Fur Day* outing – has maybe lost some of its punch since its inception some four years ago.

There's the sensation that the game has simply lost ground in terms of sensationalism, with the shock value having drained somewhat from Conker's rebellious offend 'em up. With sex having come out of the closet quite explicitly in the past year – irrespective of the quality of the games that carried it – and gratuitous violence becoming commonplace, the foul-mouthed appeal of Conker's unruly platforming adventure feels slightly diminished. Still, such lewd content has rarely been portrayed in such an iconoclastic manner: the fleeting joy of seeing a cartoon cow detonate through diarrhoea, or a battling a massive log by flushing it out of its faeces-laden lair, is one that remains unbettered. Swearing may not be big or clever, but when it comes from the mouths of angelic-looking platforming icons, there's still a dirty, childish giggle to be had. However much the impact of Conker's shock value has depreciated, there's not been such a sharp contrast between the vile and the cute, with only perhaps the recent *Legend Of Kay*, with its slight but surprisingly upfront political commentary, daring to betray the asinine appearance of the cuddly action adventure genre.

However, it appears that little has changed during the opening few hours of the game, with the exception of its impressively glossy looks. Tweaks are definitely present, though, and such sections

The fleeting joy of seeing a cartoon cow detonate through diarrhoea, or a battling a massive log by flushing it out of its faeces-laden lair, is one that remains unbettered



While the solo campaign appears to remain a little too faithful to the original, that hasn't stopped Rare rendering the game with ripples of detail. It'll be another latter-day technical showcase, if nothing else

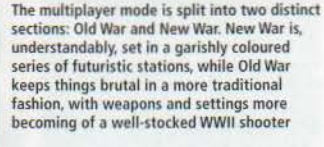


Conversations and cut-scenes can't be skipped, but they can be fast forwarded with the white button. Most of Conker's humour hits occur in these stretches, however, so it's best not to be too impatient with them



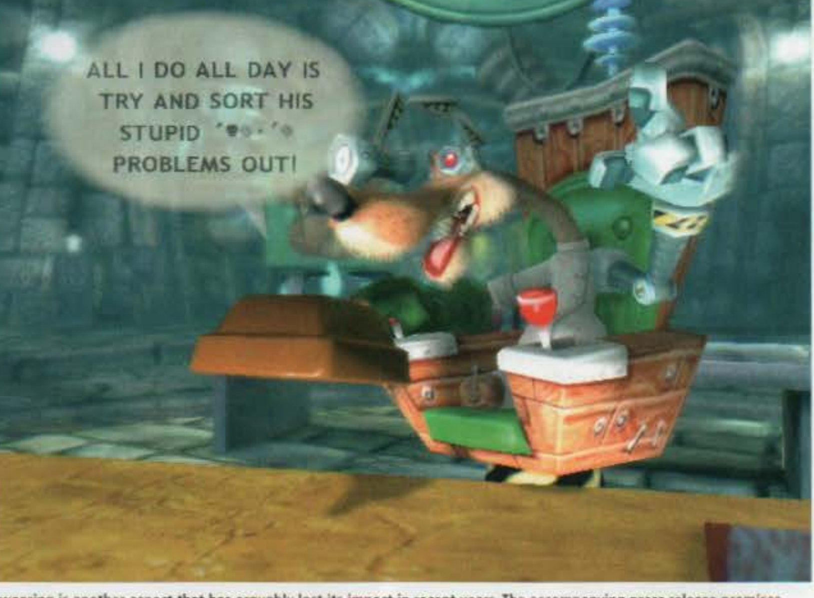





The multiplayer mode is split into two distinct sections: Old War and New War. New War is, understandably, set in a garishly coloured series of futuristic stations, while Old War keeps things brutal in a more traditional fashion, with weapons and settings more becoming of a well-stocked WWII shooter



Chapter X is a dedicated deathmatch campaign for solo players. Medals are offered as rewards for progress, which will earn the player access to unlockables, such as new maps



Swearing is another aspect that has arguably lost its impact in recent years. The accompanying press release promises 'enhanced profanity', but no particular cuss stands out as being noticeably outrageous during the opening stages

as the beach landing scene feel refined and, with dual-stick control, more enjoyable for it.

Another prospective problem lies, once again, with the nature of the original game. Despite being a brazen sideswipe at platforming, it never managed to escape the flaws of the genre – irritating cameras, frustrating bosses and jaded objectives – regardless of the game's colourful chain of parody-heavy moments, and they're still present in the game's opening chapters. But, since the bulk of *Bad Fur Day*'s standout features occurred in the game's latter half, as it morphed from a hit-and-miss platforming lampoon to a brilliantly nonsensical out-and-out attack on big-name movies, there's still plenty of scope for *Live And Reloaded* to become something enjoyable and graceful to play.

A broadside on platform games was understandable for an N64 game, but when the genre is as marginalised as it is these days – more so on Xbox than any other console – it's equally understandable that this extended update makes significant use of a strength of the host console: Live play.

The online (or system linked, or even offline against 'Dumbots') multiplayer section isn't just a functional reworking of the main game. Far from it, in fact – this is elaborate, team-heavy territory, with a rigid emphasis on role and scenario. The squirrels continue their mortal battle against the snivelling, rasp-voiced Teddiz, with troops on both sides being given distinctive attributes that weaken and strengthen them substantially in comparison to other character classes, which – much like *Unreal Championship 2* – leaves it feeling a world away from the level playing fields of *Halo*.

Long Rangers, for example, are self-explanatory snipers, with recourse to enhanced vision and a number of ammo types. Demolishers are lumbering brutes toting rocket launchers and packing grenades, able to enter a thunderous melee state for close encounters. With so many elaborate class-specific details – sentry guns, disguises, the ability to fake death, guns that can heal – and vividly named vehicles on offer – such as the Sky Steed, Mule Bomber and Toad Jeep – it'll need to be supremely balanced and smoothly implemented so that its complexities can become true enhancements and not cheap exploits or clunky surplus. Still, with the Live scene in such a seemingly healthy stride in recent months, there's definite potential for Conker to at least be reloaded time and time again in the disc drives of many an online Xbox owner.



New fur old

One neat surprise within the story mode is Conker's initial encounter with a bridge-blocking gargoyle. As perhaps a little poke in the ribs for fans of the original, the established tactic for conquering the guardian no longer works, and instead provokes a short and amusing skit on the game designers' tweaking of the early sections to give the illusion that the rest of the game will be just as fresh. It's just the kind of self-referential pep the game needs and, hopefully contradicting the punchline of the gag itself, isn't just limited to the opening stretch.

FORMAT: **MAC, PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **WIDELOAD GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ASPYR**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2005 (US), TBA (UK)**

Stubbs The Zombie

Meet perhaps the unlikeliest hero ever, as the Halo engine undergoes reincarnation



The game's more dramatic shootouts are calibrated on the assumption that you'll be wielding a merry band of zombie helpers on arrival. If you're alone, you'll need to start feasting on brains to manufacture some backup



Dead man walking

A side effect of Stubbs' snacking habits is a huge challenge in game balancing. Every zombie you make increases your ranks by one, and also reduces the enemy force by one, doubling the impact. As a result, the zombies have to be weak and disposable, a solution that many squad-based games also have to adopt, an uneasy solution when they're supposed to be your fellow soldiers. Where *Stubbs* scores is that this balance makes sense within game's context – there's no surprise that zombies make rubbish soldiers, and no possibility of feeling guilt at the death of something that's already dead. Even when it was you that killed them in the first place.



The 30-second pitch for *Stubbs The Zombie* is supposed to be: 'It's the zombie game where you're the zombie!' That leaves two problems, however. The first is what to you do with the remaining 26 seconds, and the next is that for many gamers, the real 30-second pitch is: 'It's that game that Alex Seropian who founded Bungie and then left is making with the Halo engine!' Even that leaves you with a few spare seconds, which is all to the good, because there's more to *Stubbs* than meets the eye.

The setting takes some explaining. Stubbs isn't just a failed salesman, he's a salesman who failed during the Great Depression. His resulting death left him buried in the dust of a Pennsylvania field, and saddled him with all the bitter desperation of The Grapes Of Wrath and Glengarry Glen Ross combined.



The game handles its violence with a slapstick enthusiam which robs it of its ability to be offensive. On paper, however, it remains a disturbing recipe of dismemberment and death, and will be rated accordingly

His miserable grave is disturbed, however, when 25 years later a local entrepreneur builds a city of the future on top of it, all flying cars and '50s optimism. Stubbs awakes, and two key moments in American capitalist history collide in a frenzy of brain-eating and limb-wrenching.

Sounds serious? It isn't at all. The game draws on its real-world inspiration with gentle affection and the result is funny and fresh, and that deftness carries on into the gameplay. Stubbs, although as fast on his feet as all modern zombies need to be, isn't armed. Reduced to melee attacks and an endless, suffocating arsenal of 'gut grenades', his main offensive capability is to eat the brains of his enemies, turning them into zombies and creating for himself a small army of followers. Controlled with very simple push and pull commands (which essentially translate as 'Come here' or 'Go ahead of me'), Stubbs can use his followers as extra muscle or disposable meat shields.

When that isn't enough, he also has the option of ripping off his arm. This then becomes independently mobile, and can scuttle up walls, through vents and on to ceilings. Drop the hand down on to an enemy's head, and you gain control of their brain, allowing you to use whatever weapon they happen to be holding. It adds a very different feel to the game, and capitalises on the ballistic element which the *Halo* engine i so well equipped to deliver.

This is a game which still faces huge challenges – the humour of the setup could jar as often as it pleases, the remote hand puzzles could become tediously reliant on ai vents and switches, Stubbs' simple combat could become wearing – but there's no questioning the appeal of the premise or the solidity of the preparation. Less spectacular, perhaps, than the 30-second pitch, but infinitely more reassuring.



Some elements of the game's interiors are intially underwhelming, but that shifts when you move outside. There's an impressive sense of air and light, and a surprising amount of character in what could have been generic fields









Nintendogs

Lock up your daughters: Nintendo is coming for them

If delegates at Iwata's GDC keynote didn't know what to make of the demo of *Electroplankton* (see p41), they knew exactly what to make of *Nintendogs*: big puppy-dog eyes and little mewls of adoration. Not since Bambi first wobbled onscreen has an auditorium of otherwise sensible grown-ups been reduced to such over-use of the world 'adorable'.

The truth is the opposite, of course. *Nintendogs* is as viciously calculating a piece of market manipulation as you're likely to find. Clearly calibrated to woo the biggest constituents of Iwata's hallowed non-gamer demographic – the ladies – the game is scheduled to be released on the same day as the pretty pink and powder blue DS variants,



and is supported by a website which owes more to the Ikea catalogue than anything else. Split into three variants, would-be *Nintendogs* owners will have to pick which set of five breeds they want, and it's impossible to believe that fits of tears and tantrums won't see parents (and perhaps even some husbands) taking all three home.

However, *Nintendogs'* power isn't a product of empty marketing savvy. The game takes an obviously marketable idea and brings it to life in a way that may make it unstoppable. The animation of the puppies is often spectacular, as they skitter across polished floors, ears flopping and tails waggling. Spectating is entertaining enough, watching your pups wrangle over a towel and collide in mid-air as they leap for a balloon. Introduce a stylus, and no one can resist. The decision to have to puppies come and scrabble at the top screen, paws up and ears cocked as they try to get to you, is one of the soundest pieces of interaction design ever devised. Suckers will scratch under their pups' ears, cajoling them to roll over and reveal a plump belly. Sadists will poke them in the eyes until they screw their faces up and scamper away with a grumpy yip.

Beyond the simple playroom are dog-training championships, which – though simple – benefit from the immediacy of the touchscreen input: flicking a Frisbee in a careful arc is surprisingly satisfying. Other aspects are harder to predict – the appeal of the dog-walking mode, which sees you tugging at the leash with the stylus, is yet to be explained. And then there are the awful questions – what happens to the dog mess and what happens about death?

There's no question that *Nintendogs* will triumph in Japan, and almost certainly around the world as well. It's not yet quite clear how much the game will deserve that success – if it's just a glossy Tamagotchi or a genuine advance in our understanding of play – but those at the front of the queues are unlikely to care.





It's not yet clear how extensive the dog-walking sections of the game are, or if your pup will suffer any ill effects from being left indoors for several weeks at a time

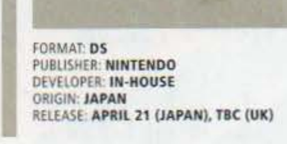




The competitive dog show sections are the nearest *Nintendogs* gets to traditional videogaming. The simple agility tests and Frisbee-throwing tasks depend on stylus input and are surprisingly enjoyable and satisfying



Doggy shower-time was demoed at GDC, but the recognition of the movement of the stylus seemed worryingly innacurate



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **APRIL 21 (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**



Low, slow and loud

Thanks to the DS's microphone, your dog can be trained to respond to your voice. Rather than requiring you to rely on a traditional vocabulary of 'Sit' and 'Play dead' and 'That's disgusting, what have you rolled in?' the game lets you use your own words, building up a small but personal language between you and your pet. Demoed at GDC it still seemed a little shaky, but the possibility of barking 'Roly-poly! Roly-poly!' at your disobedient pup in public adds a whole new delightful humiliation to DS ownership.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **DEEP SHADOWS**
ORIGIN: **UKRAINE**
RELEASE: **MAY 20 (US), TBC (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E144**

Boiling Point: Road To Hell

Descend to the abyss with Deep Shadows' dark FPS; the man on this mission is dangerously on the edge



Taxis will, for a modest sum, transport you to any region of the map right from the start

Different people boil at different degrees, we're told. Saul Meyers – protagonist of Deep Shadows' ambitious FPS – has lost his daughter in South America. He's packed himself, a knife and a pistol on a flight out of Paris, and soared to that fateful temperature where enough truly becomes enough. Depending on your familiarity with both eastern European development and sandbox games in general, what happens next is either the last thing or everything you'd expect. Meyers sells coconuts, hunts wild animals, learns to drive a boat, ferries miscellaneous items from one place to another – essentially he demonstrates all the patience and persistence required of a man not on a mission, but on a frankly selfish grab bag of missions.

Boiling Point is an obsessive hybrid of *GTA*, *Deus Ex* and *Far Cry* that, despite its sweltering climes and infernal subtitle, feels persistently cold. Its geometry is impressive for a game that boasts over 625 square kilometres of intricately rendered terrain and uninterrupted (by loading bars, at least) gameplay. But if the intent of such a feat is heightened immersion, then the game's thin spread of character and finesse threatens that illusion long before it ever heats up.

An efficient waypoint system leads from one mission or previously encountered NPC to the next, and is one of the game's strong points. Concern, however, lies in the overwhelmingly generic design and the niggling fragility that pervades throughout. You're expected to nurture a reputation with rival factions, but it can all be undermined when, thanks to an awkward camera and complex geography, you haplessly reverse your car over an idling foot solider. In attempting to fully employ the power of a modern PC (and it'll have most owners wondering if theirs are any modern enough) the game currently sits awkwardly between the visual simplicity of the console sandbox fraternity and the near-realism of the modern FPS. Textures often feel as if they've been thrown at objects; characters convey little humanity via their sporadic dialogue and yapping jaws. Actor Arnold Vosloo provides the player's likeness but, though he's recognisable, the presence he imposed in The Mummy and 24 seems muted here.

The disconcerting impression is that the game's Ukranian developer has long been labouring under a false pretence: that the sole virtue of an open-world game is the number of swings in the playground. For its thousands of weapon combinations, cars, tanks, boats and planes, few of *Boiling Point*'s toys feel particularly enjoyable to play with. There may be a vital layer of polish yet to be added but, at such a late stage, this enormous project may well end up feeling like a job half done.



Car dealers provide a wealth of vehicles that double up as mobile inventories, all ready to be inadvertently driven into a tree or river at the time of your choosing



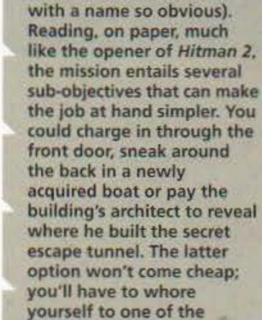
The scale of the project has resulted, in preview builds at least, in a game that seems hastily cobbled together – this editor's desk, for example, is unconvincingly tidy







A raft of scaleable effects, such as reflective water and dynamic shadows, is on offer for those who deify their computers with the latest hardware. Those who don't may find the whole gaming experience a little less rewarding



Eight million ways to die?

Much effort has gone into *Boiling Point*'s scope, but it currently lacks the finesse or character of *GTA* or *Far Cry*. Still, its mission structure demonstrates the developer's noble intent. An early goal, for example, requires the infiltration of a mansion owned by one Don Pedro (clearly a pseudonym, as no one could be born with a name so obvious). Reading, on paper, much like the opener of *Hitman 2*, the mission entails several sub-objectives that can make the job at hand simpler. You could charge in through the front door, sneak around the back in a newly acquired boat or pay the building's architect to reveal where he built the secret escape tunnel. The latter option won't come cheap; you'll have to whore yourself to one of the game's money-spinning pastimes to foot the bill.



San Andreas aside, it's hard to think of games featuring tractors – and harder still to think of any which haven't benefited from the inclusion. It indicates that *Total Overdose* understands the ingredients of a good sandbox







Total Overdose



Molotov tequilas, deadly sombreros and time travel – all par for the course in SCi's Mexican stand-off

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **SCI**
DEVELOPER: **DEADLINE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

To many, Central America is an endless pool party where mannequin-perfect girls bask in the shade of tattooed beer bellies and shoulders blooming with hair. Trees are being steadily replaced by parasols, the economy refined to a single currency of hats. The population of cancer-proof lotharios snort their lunch before regurgitating it into words that end almost exclusively with 'o'. If boredom sets in, it's customary for the locals to perforate each other with automatic pistols disguised as guitars and other household objects before somersaulting into whichever fountain, doorway or window is most convenient. Though their ways are gratuitous and deadly, no one here could care less because, as is probably made clear on their birth certificates, they're all completely loco.

This madness is one of modern culture's most alluring fictions – a collision of Mexican and Californian trash culture into a battleground of eses, gringos and mariachis. *Grand Theft Auto* has certainly sipped from its creative pool on many a successful occasion, but there's never been anything quite like *Total Overdose*. Shamelessly derivative of *Max Payne*, it's already shaking up a cocktail of balletic ultraviolence, tongue-in-cheek combos and referential humour that tastes tantalisingly unique but reassuringly familiar.

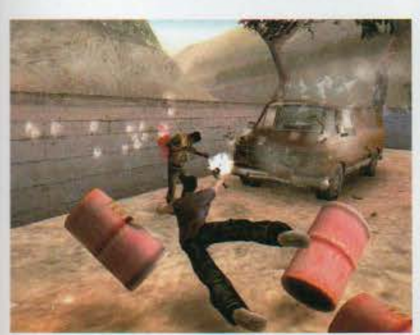
Following the misadventures of Ramiro Cruz in his quest to uncover the secrets of his father's death and the identity of an international drug cartel, *Overdose* stands to become a novel, unpretentious boon to the thirdperson shooter genre. Where else, for example, will you find a combat system that encourages players to catch the disembodied hats of fallen enemies on their heads before wearing them into battle?

A supporting wealth of gimmicks and quirks enliven combat while belying a genuinely impressive mechanic that runs underneath. Gradually shrinking reticules make headshots as simple to execute as more straightforward button-blasting yet still they feel rewarding. Players will wall-run and cartwheel around enemies while exploiting a recognisable bullet-time gauge (though here, it's referred to as stamina), stringing together combos that release increasingly useful power-ups. Between each kill, a clock counts down your dwindling combo opportunity, strategically placed time extensions enabling dedicated players to, allegedly, clear entire levels of enemies with a single prolonged attack.



The inclusion of a bullet-time effect will hopefully prove a knowing pastiche on the pulp film styles the game draws on, rather than a knee-jerk piece of copycatting

Sandbox missions, drivable vehicles and a heavily cinematic flavour suggest that the game owes most of its life to Rockstar, even if it does make several original design choices of its own. Its visuals are rendered with the same clash of rich characterisation and modest detail as *GTA*, cut-scenes coming alive thanks to capable voiceovers and hilarious turns of event. There's a thematically apt licensed soundtrack that works in and around an authentic incidental score, all evocative of the dusty freeways and personalised carnage of From Dusk 'Til Dawn and Desperado. Another brazen lift comes in the form of time reversal – a *Prince Of Persia*-inspired ability whereby the player can rewind from their death to a few seconds beforehand and resume. Though it'll garner a few jeers for this open willingness to steal, it's quite clear that *Overdose* doesn't give two hoots. Really, there isn't a more appropriate attitude it could have.





Characterisation is already clearly strong – if intentionally one-dimensional – and the game seems able to match its script-writing and voice-acting standards with the dynamism and detail of the visual models evident throughout



Insane in the game

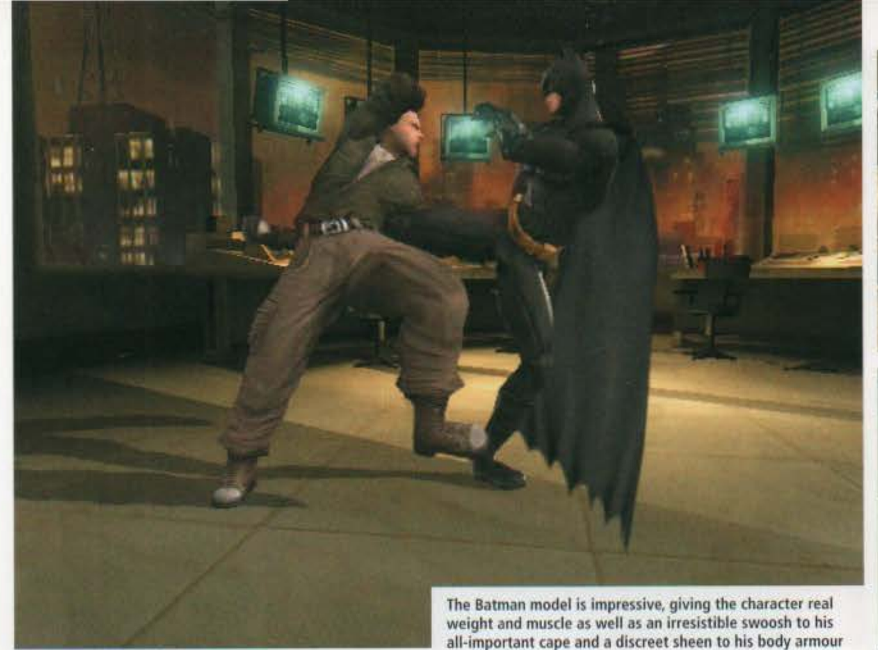
There are times when even special moves are inadequate. By *Total Overdose*'s reckoning, those times are all the time, hence its array of deliciously preposterous 'loco' moves. Kicking off with the Golden Gun – a time period in which headshots come thick, fast and easy – things grow progressively bizarre. A piñata, for instance can be tossed amid a crowd of people who will, of course, proceed to beat it to the point where it explodes. There's a giant sombrero that, when successfully cast on to an opponent's head, will turn the unlucky recipient into a target for friendly fire. It all sounds suitably insane until, later on, the Mexican Wrestler ups the ante by sending a Lycra-clad knife-wielding madman off in pursuit of your understandably startled enemies.



FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX, GC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EUROCOM**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2005**



While there does seem to be a fair amount of traditional stealth, the emphasis seems to be more on foresight than patient pattern observation



The Batman model is impressive, giving the character real weight and muscle as well as an irresistible swoosh to his all-important cape and a discreet sheen to his body armour





Batman Begins

A chance to play Batman Begins just as work on the movie becomes Batman Finished

There's nothing like a film tie-in to make you realise how unusual the videogame industry's timetable is. A scant three months before the release of the film, and the presentation of *Batman Begins* is peppered with 'We can't show that yet' and 'Don't mention anything about that'. There's no great secret that a quick trip to Ain't It Cool wouldn't unveil, but it says a lot about how much more respect – or possibly paranoia – Hollywood has for script, story and suspense than the videogame industry usually exhibits.

So, for now, what *Batman Begins* is about is what Batman Isn't. Batman isn't a superhero, he isn't Rambo, he isn't Adam West and he isn't, thankfully, Val Kilmer. The game takes its cues from where the film takes most of *its* cues from – Mazzucchelli and Miller's Batman: Year One, a subtle retelling of Batman's origins that preserves enough of Bruce Wayne's humanity to make his brutal obsession genuinely shocking. Which isn't to say you should expect that level of psychodrama in the game.

Instead, you get a Batman who can't pitch into a fight like an off-the-peg game hero. Bullets don't chip away at his health bar, they chip away at his ribcage and, as a consequence, he'll die quickly. To progress, you need to wear the enemy down. Lurk in the rafters and cause distractions with a few well-thrown batarangs. Lure unsuspecting guards to rickety gantries loaded with explosive barrels. Unsettle the remaining heavies enough and they'll panic, dropping their guns, leaving the way clear for Batman to drop in from the sky and take them on, hand to hand – or, more likely, boot to face.

It's an interesting premise for a game featuring an action hero – the designers cite the idea of mixing the stealth of *Splinter Cell* with the direct combat of a traditional action game, but the initial feeling is more strategic planning than stealthy patience. With a heavy emphasis on vertical space, at this stage it looks like your best bet is often to find a vertiginous vantage spot and then scan the area for possible distractions. That EA feel is already there – this isn't a game that wants you to get stuck, so expect plenty of cues to suggest which fractured pillar might benefit from a quick-fire batarang, or which convenient beam might offer a handy grapple spot. Then it becomes a process of whittling down the enemy, picking on the most heavily armed first.



It's not yet clear how Batman's brutality and morality will be balanced in the film. From a gameplay perspective, the violence of the fights is certainly highly gratifying

Without more extended play it's hard to know how well the balance will play out. Although Eurocom promises flexibility and freedom in the way you set up each fight, how much can these predetermined interactions really offer? Will the fighting – at the moment solid but unspectacular – sustain your interest? Only time – and Warner Bros' PR schedule – will tell.

To the Batmobile: missions galore

The biggest parts of the game to remain under wraps are the driving sections. The new Batmobile, revealed from early movie promo shots as an all-terrain monster – more squashed-down Humvee than souped-up muscle car – offers missions that make up nearly a third of the game, from slick street races to late-night forest rampages. It hasn't been possible to see these for ourselves, but Eurocom says it's very happy with the way the handling has worked out, offering driving-game quality rather than a minigame add-on feel.



The game uses vertical space well, letting Batman clamber up pipes and dangle from drains as he spies on heavies below and launches well-aimed batarangs



Enemies attack in plentiful numbers and forms, with minor framerate dips as a trade-off for the weight of numbers. Hopefully, party skirmishes won't drag the speed down

Untold Legends: Brotherhood Of The Blade

Even in a preview build without provision for brotherhood, this PSP action-RPG appeals

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMEN**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E147**

You may not be surprised to hear that a randomised dungeon crawl is as addictive on a handheld as it is on console and PC. What's more surprising is how assured SOE's new entrant is: beyond the standard boxes that the genre demands be generated, ticked and looted for items, the game world feels more involved, the weapons weightier and character classes more rewardingly differentiated than recent competition.

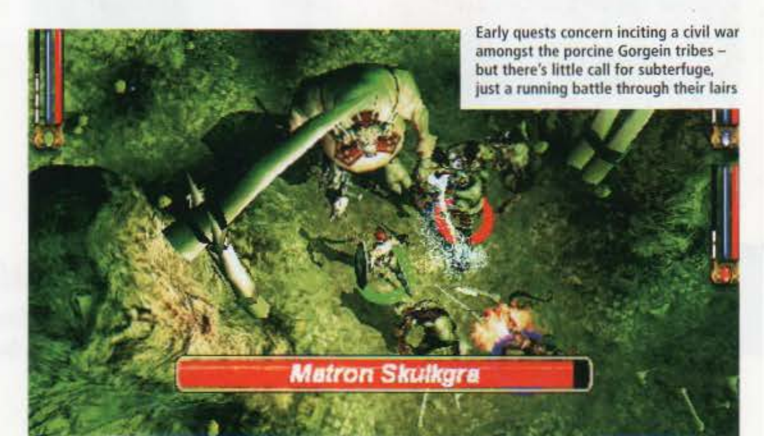
At the same time, there's evidence of the game's development being as speedy as a launch title demands. There are so few appearance choices in character generation that it nearly makes the options scrollbar redundant, and the overall presentation of menus and text is equally minimal – a decision likely made for legibility, but a missed opportunity, considering the Victorian-tribal hybrid art design on show elsewhere. The chipset musical score is similarly lowkey compared to the streamed CD-quality soundtracks of other PSP games – too medieval for future-sculpted hardware.

But *Untold Legends* is already a curious mix of old and new: the crisp, well-animated 3D visuals of the adventure coexist with the story's hand-drawn portraits and text-box conversations, and the new-user-friendly streamlining of the character management screens doesn't quite hold back an RPG enthusiast's ream of statistics. There's an obvious attempt to make those statistics more immediately tangible, though, with weapon upgrades loosing fiery novas or healing rays in addition to their softer-spoken numeric bonuses.

Most importantly, the game has a smooth enough flow to ease the wear of the hack-and-slash grindstone. The analogue nub acquits itself well for responsive movement, and the environments are large enough to be daunting yet simple to navigate. A teleport gate system allows quick daytripping between areas, and it's also possible to 'recall' back to your home city at any point (except during boss encounters), curtailing even the need to trudge back to a local teleport. Rewards are plentiful, with practically every second foe coughing up an item worthy of addition to your constantly updating arsenal: it's almost overgenerous, but ensures that every snatched moment of game time is potentially productive.

There's enough to enjoy in the singleplayer game to make up for the absence of multiplayer in the preview – a positive sign for any lone heroes lacking a PSP-enabled adventuring party. But the success or failure of *Untold Legends'* full fourplayer cooperative mode is important for both its own community and that of its host hardware: as the first major cooperative title on the PSP, other developers will likely be watching it to determine their own commitment to wifi.

Early quests concern inciting a civil war amongst the porcine Gorgein tribes – but there's little call for subterfuge, just a running battle through their lairs



Upgrading your weapons grants the expected elemental damage (and particle trails), but also the chance to trigger heavy-duty magic on strikes



The great outdoors

Beyond the gates of Aven lie wilderness environments peppered with entrances to sub-dungeons. Despite occasionally obvious hedgerow-by-hedgerow construction, they provide a more involving link between locations than a static world map – and field some truly disconcerting ambushes when a dozen enemies emerge from the trees on a wooded path.



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

Tales Of Legendia

Namco risks shaking up its money tree with a new look for the latest Tales chapter

One aspect Namco has seen fit to leave intact is the side-on battle system (right) – a hallmark of the *Tales* series since its Super Famicom inception 11 years ago. The organic world visuals, meanwhile, are simple but striking, occasionally recalling *Klonoa* in the scale of their otherworldly arbour (below)



Namco may be a house built on successes in the arcade, but the foundation of its videogame business in Japan remains the *Tales* series, with each new episode all but guaranteed a comfortable sales success. It's surprising, then, that it has risked displeasing its legion of fans with some changes to that magic formula – especially having witnessed the price of such innovation when Capcom's *Dragon Quarter* was disastrously received by the *Breath Of Fire* faithful.

Legendia's biggest upset is in the character design, with Kazuto Nakazawa making his game debut (his usual field being anime, from the Samurai Champloo animated series to the O'Ren Ichii sequence in Kill Bill). While the illustrations for his gaunt, waif-like heroes are certainly striking, their in-game representations retain the typical superdeformed *Tales* style – making the change seem disappointingly (but judiciously) less radical.

The world map also seems to have been discarded in favour of a constant location, with the environment itself – a hundred-kilometre-long island that has taken root on a long-abandoned spacecraft – being something of a novelty. While the sci-fi/fantasy mix is only slightly less of a JRPG staple than coming-of-age melodrama – the latter still features prominently in *Legendia*, of course – there's the potential for it to be one of the more interesting *Tales*, and it's already one of the most visually enticing.

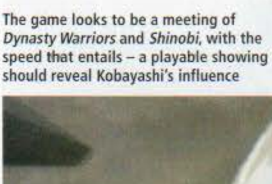
Whether *Legendia*'s changes go any deeper than its looks won't be evident for a few hours into its storyline, an aspect Namco remains guarded on at this stage of the game's introduction: the smart money, and indeed perhaps Namco's money, is on the game finding a niche between the latest *Dragon Quest*'s traditionalism and the next *Final Fantasy*'s iconoclasm.

Sengoku Basara

After giving a history lesson in Mediterranean death by the sword, Capcom turns its attentions back to local matters

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (PRODUCTION STUDIO 4)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MAY (JAPAN)**

The game looks to be a meeting of *Dynasty Warriors* and *Shinobi*, with the speed that entails – a playable showing should reveal Kobayashi's influence





It's unlikely that Sengoku-era samurai action games will ever fall from favour with Japanese developers – there's certainly been a recent resurgence of interest in giving historical figures the combo-chaining, army-scattering recognition they so rightly deserve. Capcom's entry into the field, *Sengoku Basara*, is ironically timed, following Yoshiki Okamoto's high-profile departure from the company to make his own Sengoku slasher, *Genji*.

But *Sengoku Basara* has no shortage of production clout, marking Studio 4 head and *Resident Evil 4* producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi's return to the PS2 action scene – his first title since the original *Devil May Cry*, unless last year's *Under The Skin* could be called an action game. Joining him is character designer Makoto Tsuchibayashi (previously character designer for *DMC1* and the two PS2 *Shinobi* titles), whose expressive brushstrokes provide the artistic licence to reimagine the historical warlords as willowy, graceful sword-dancers.

Unlike *Dynasty Warriors*, your chosen character is a one-man army, facing off against platoons of enemy troops without the benefit of allies – or even an ongoing battle, other than the one within in the radius of his twin blades or lances. Areas shown so far are sparsely detailed open steppes, but much more vibrant than the mud and fog of comparable PS2 brawlers: the emphasis is clearly on speed of gameplay rather than scenic appreciation, supported by an economic use of detail on enemy soldiers.





While only two characters have been shown in action, 16 will be included in the final game, each with equally attractive design and unique, spectacular special attacks

Sengoku Basara's most immediate concern will be whether it can stand out from the crowd. Likely to be a major player in Capcom's E3 charge, a playable build will provide the answer to whether Kobayashi's winning streak can stretch from the beginning to the close of the current generation's hardware.

Electroplankton

Nintendo brings a slice of the art world to its third pillar, in a work that promises 'harmony, not adrenaline'





FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **TOSHIO IWAI**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**

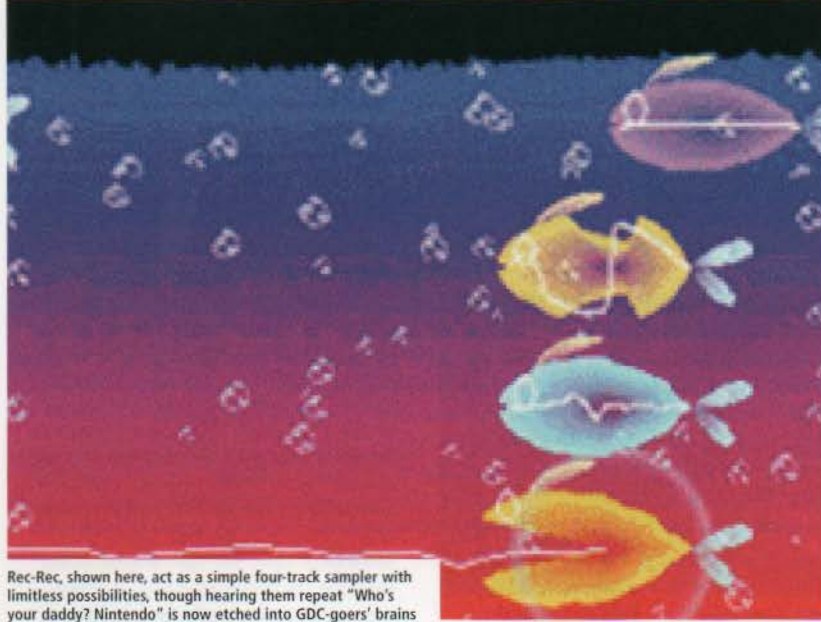
In his keynote address to the Game Developers Conference '05, **Satoru Iwata** laid out Nintendo's plans to not only appease its core audience but to introduce new types of experiences that gamers "may not even know they want." At the fore of this charge is *Electroplankton*, Toshio Iwai's latest synaesthetic foray from the art world into the game world.

Well known and highly regarded as a studio artist – though not yet the most household of names – Iwai has been deftly blending light, sound and tactile interfaces in every medium, including games, for two decades. *Otocky*, his first commercial title, was a Famicom Disk System musical shooter in precisely the same fashion as *Rez*, predating it by some 15 years. Iwai was also the driving force behind Maxis' *SimTunes* (reborn from the ill-fated Super Famicom project *Sound Fantasy*), PlayStation2's 'scribble performance' game *Bikkuri Mouse*, and a small handful of mobile phone and non-commercial WonderSwan works.

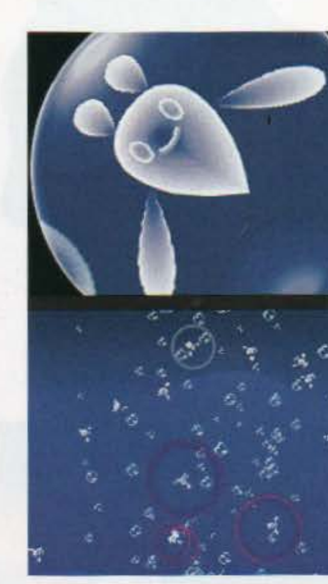
With the DS, it appears that the hardware has finally caught up to where Iwai's heart truly lies, and *Electroplankton* is an accumulation of the interactive experiences he's been experimenting with in a gallery setting all his life, mass-produced and topped off with happy-face accessibility. In it, players will interact with ten different phyla of musical marine life (autonomous musical creatures being one of the most prevalent themes in his art) as seen through a microscope, each of which respond uniquely to the player's touch or voice commands.

The San-animalcule, for instance, act as simple trackers, responding with a sequential melody based on their position on the touchscreen, while the Tracy and Luminaria follow the paths laid out by stylus strokes or by manipulating directional gates, all creating something between symphony and dissonance according to the actions of the user. Others, like the Rec-Rec and Volvoice, allow for four-track beatboxing and similar vocal interactions, and – in a fitting tribute to its publisher and to the hardware that first inspired the artist – the aptly named Beatnes allow you to lay down 8bit beats and effects over Mario's invincibility-star theme.

All footage of the game shown thus far points toward a highly engrossing and hypnotic experience, if a solitary one. There's no word thus far on wireless communication with, or accompaniment from, fellow plankton, and the package – as with *Band Brothers* – is rounded out with a free pair of headphones, leading us to believe that this is a title in which the explicit purpose is to lose yourself. Accompanying the release of *Electroplankton* will be an exhibition of the game itself at the Laforet Museum Harajuku, creating a full circle – a lifetime of Iwai's collected gallery works, condensed to a game, and back to the gallery again.



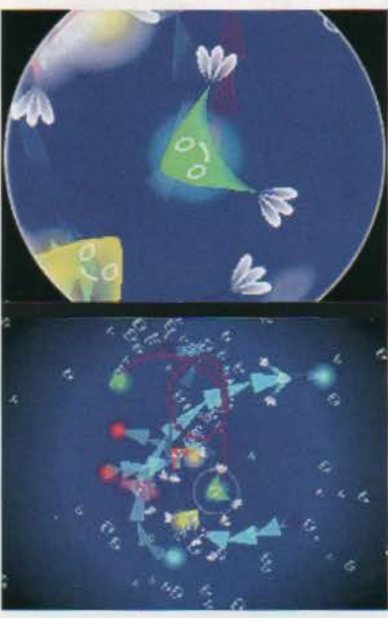
Rec-Rec, shown here, act as a simple four-track sampler with limitless possibilities, though hearing them repeat "Who's your daddy? Nintendo" is now etched into GDC-goers' brains



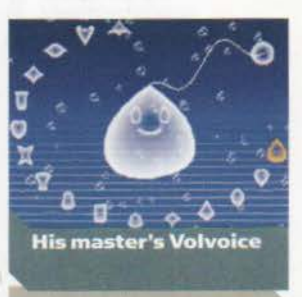
Interactions are performed and displayed on the bottom screen, so the top one is free for a close-up view of the vacuous grin of the plankton being interacted with



Adjusting the angles of the leaves will vary the tone they emit. Combined with the entrancing rippling waves, the scene provides a sublime demonstration of musical maths



The lower DS screen's touch-sensitive capabilities appear to be nearly tailor-made as a vehicle for Iwai's work. After so many years of hands-on musical gallery exhibits, his partnership with Nintendo is a serendipitous fit



His master's Volvoice

Volvoice appears to be the most gregarious of the plankton, as well as possibly the most technically advanced. The game's website shows a girl speaking her name into the DS's microphone, only to hear it spoken back to her with the syllables reversed. After some quick thought, she says it again, backward, and is delighted to hear Volvoice state her proper name. We would imagine such precise results in a non-syllabic language are far from guaranteed.

FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **RADICAL ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q3 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E145**

The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction

And the comic-book titles keep on coming, proving that you can't keep a green-skinned behemoth down for long

If there were ever a tagline likely to trigger your scepticism gland, it's surely *Ultimate Destruction*. The more willing a game is to make rash promises, the less capable it usually proves to be able to deliver on them. The Incredible Hulk might just be able to break this rule of thumb, along with most everything else you can see on the screen.

Buildings, on the whole, won't topple. Tarmac will stay stuck to the ground. This isn't to be the psychopath's take on *Katamari Damacy*. But Hulk, fast and ferocious, can take on almost everything he encounters. Cars can be punched into makeshift shields, buses flattened into improvised skateboards, spires – as promised – snapped off into impromptu javelins. On playing it, you expect to be disappointed, to start to peel away the layers of restriction and frustration. What you find, however, is that Hulk delivers. 'Weaponisation', which sees Hulk able to grab anything he sees and turn it to destructive uses, is much better integrated than you might expect. A streamlined control layout allows your attention to stay focused on the unexpected results of grabbing at a wrecking ball, rather than fretting over how to control your spectacular new arsenal. Also unexpected is the robustness of the camera, which copes with 300-foot leaps with remarkable ease. The main worries at this stage are the boss encounters – perhaps essential to up the challenge in a game which otherwise might be as gratifying and as pointless as kicking over sandcastles, but which could hamper the sense of freedom and unstoppable inertia which is the game's greatest appeal.

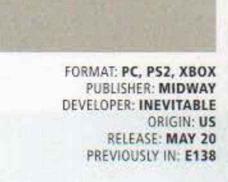
Radical has time in hand on *Hulk*, to tune and detail its vast, free-roaming city and to pitch the balance between mindless fun and structured play to ensure the game doesn't jade. As things stand, the very least it can deliver is as smashing an hour as games have ever given you.



Truck surfing is a straighforwardly giddy experience, turning the police who have turned out to oppose you into little more than a tempting collection of skittles. It's not sophisticated, but it is entirely entertaining



Damage is modestly persistent, with the bigger cracks and gouges you make in the tarmac and brickwork enduring for several – if not tens – of minutes. Ultimately, the town will heal itself, ready for another ruckus



FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **INEVITABLE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MAY 20**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**

Area 51

The sci-fi may be weak, but the horror is definitely willing, as Midway ups the suffering in its man-made hell

Area 51 begins as it always seems to begin these days: with a tutorial tour of a covert laboratory complex patrolled by a brutal military group and troubled by the lucrative videogame science of genetic meddling. When its obligatory opening amble ends, however, *Area 51* hurtles straight into the thick of Everything Going Terribly Wrong with an admirable brevity and intensity.

As soon as the player's strike team has been inserted into the contaminated hot zone – via a lengthy lift ride that, also admirably, shows that everything really has already gone terribly wrong and economically sidesteps a laboured and gradual unravelling – the shooting starts, and the melt-faced mutants pour into the line of fire in a quantity befitting of an action FPS's latter half. Your squad isn't at your command, either – it's a case of keeping up, following orders and lending your firepower to the survival efforts. This allows enemies to stream relentlessly without strategy clouding the body count, in what feels like a gushing haemorrhage of hostility as opposed to a traditional dripfeed. Gunfights often take place via the limited vision of torchlight; it's hardly a terrifying prospect, but the pitch darkness that falls whenever your gun has to be reloaded is.

If anything, *Area 51*, much like *The Suffering*, appears to be trading tactics for out-and-out shooting, and subtlety for pace, while crafting atmosphere through moody looks and slick, simple set-pieces. Which, of course, could become a wound infected with repetition, something that not even government-funded liabilities-in-laboratories seem able to find a cure for. But we'll find out soon enough if *Area 51* can maintain its straightforward chaos without mutating into a bore.



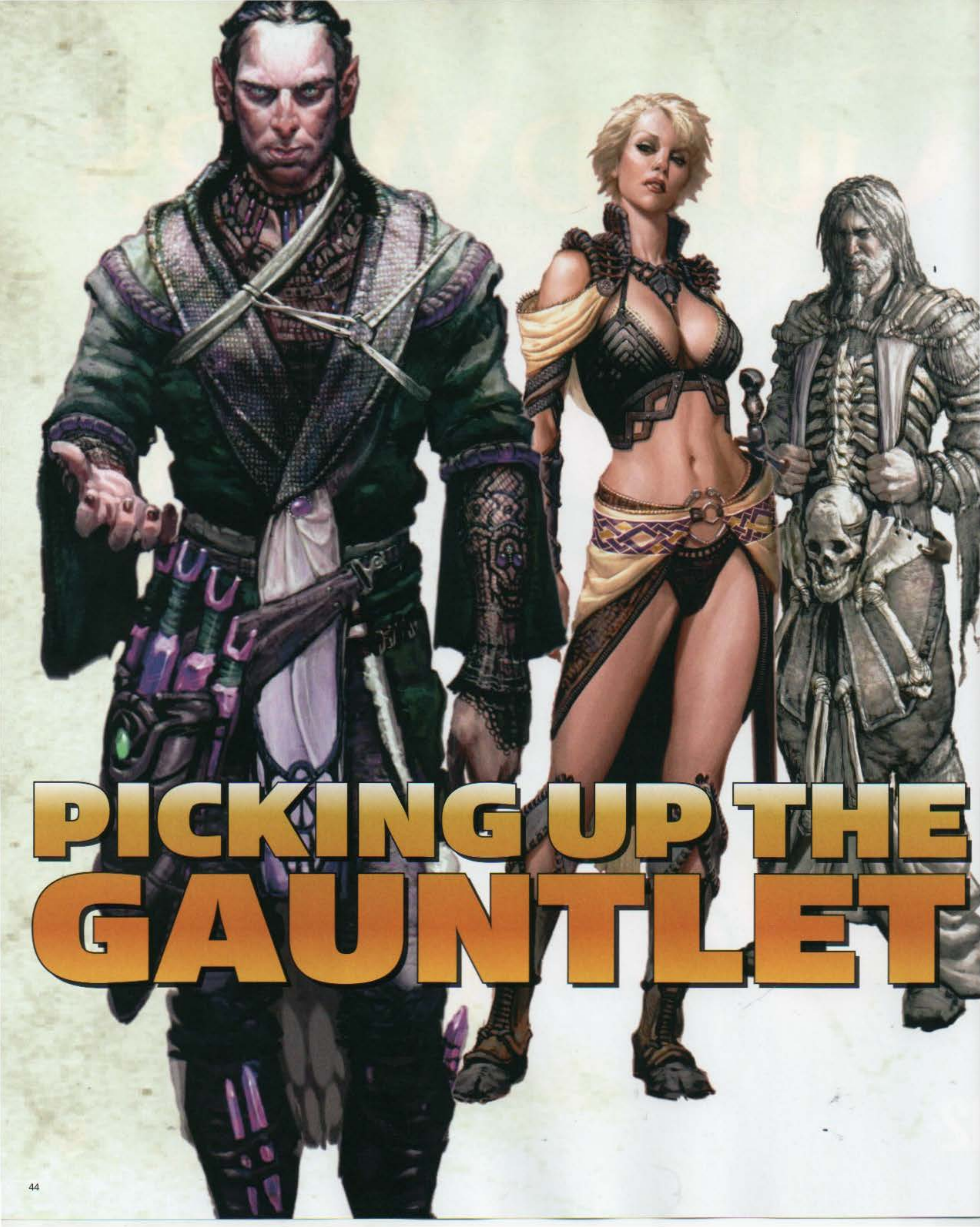
Area 51 **doesn't seem to venture into the supernatural, but keeps to gory scientific misadventure and aliens**







Much like *Metroid Prime*, a scanner is available with which to analyse the environment, allowing the game's background to be uncovered in an implicit manner



PICKING UP THE GAUNTLET

Two decades after the arcade classic, an infamous firstperson shooter designer and a regarded RPG writer are making a new *Gauntlet*



Recently, it appeared that *Gauntlet* had suffered the same fate as all who braved its halls: succumbing to gradually, inexorably dwindling health. Both Atari Games and the Midway Games West studio that inherited the company have closed their doors; the game's imposing cabinets have been lost to jealously guarded treasure rooms; 20 years on, there's a generation of gamers who've never experienced the rib-rattling, resonant tone of an inserted coin first-hand.

But if the game's presence has been reduced to a whisper of its former call to arms, it's left a legend that has never been more name-checked – even if the results of asking what exactly *Gauntlet* means can vary wildly in the explanation. Asking **John Romero** elicits a simple enough declaration: "Fast-paced, action-packed multiplayer gaming!"

It's an enthusiastic guiding principle for his work as creative director on Midway San Diego's sweeping franchise reinvention, *Seven Sorrows* – and those whose memories are less rose-clouded with regard to the game's now retrograde simplicity should be reassured by the studio's intention to build around the basics, not slavishly return to them. "It's a wonderful opportunity," says lead designer **Josh Sawyer**. "*Gauntlet*'s roots are in very simple, addictive gameplay – we have the tools now to add a lot more depth, but we still have to appeal to the classic *Gauntlet* sensibilities. It's a difficult balancing act and very challenging from a design perspective."

Some freedom to address that challenge will have been provided by *Seven Sorrows*' position as the first major *Gauntlet* title to be developed without standing in the shadow of a coin-op big brother, as Romero notes: "We've definitely severed our arcade ties from previous *Gauntlets*, as we changed the design of the game to focus on the home console experience of long, continuous gameplay sessions." If the game's new focus is evident mechanically in the ability to build persistent characters – boosting skills and filling inventories – it's more immediately apparent

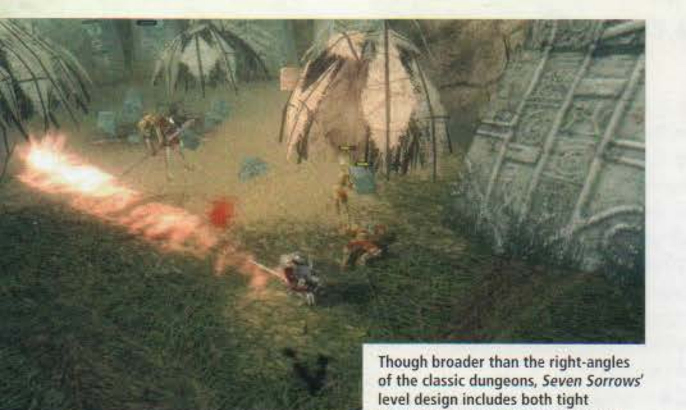


The heroes, reassembled: from facing page left to right, Elf, Valkyrie, Wizard and Warrior, joined by new counterparts Tragedian and Lancer

TITLE: **GAUNTLET: SEVEN SORROWS**
FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **MIDWAY SAN DIEGO**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **WINTER 2005**



Each character posesses a unique personal super attack for when cooperation fails – the Valkyrie's is Flock, sending a storm of ravens out to strike at targets according to button presses



Though broader than the right-angles of the classic dungeons, *Seven Sorrows'* level design includes both tight funnelling corridors and open arenas

in the strength of *Seven Sorrows'* visuals, a majestically dense world away from the first game's graph-paper-mapped dungeons.

That imagery also seems to be the clue to Romero's involvement in a title that's otherwise outside his field of infamy: recalling his designs for a medieval *Quake* and the Grecian timeslips of *Daikatana*, we ask if epic fantasy is a subject close to his heart. "Yes, I love games set in medieval periods," he enthuses, "which is why I was happy to have Raven Software create *Heretic* and *Hexen* – because the games we were making at id Software were everything *but* medieval fantasy."

And yet *Seven Sorrows'* look is almost everything but what's expected from a franchise never concerned with adventurousness in its art direction, boasting a sharp-edged tribal feel as potentially thorny as the original's was massmarket. "We wanted to get a little more subdued and grounded in Earth's history with some of our designs," explains Sawyer. "I've never really been concerned that it will be a harder sell. People respond well to vanilla fantasy art design because it's what they are familiar with, but on a subconscious level a lot of people are also familiar with the visual style of old Chinese architecture, viking weapons and African beadwork. We want to blend modern fantasy styles with history, so the player feels an immediate connection but still has a sense of wonder when they look at our game."

It's certainly produced a sense of alarm from some *Gauntlet* old guard who feel the switch to thirdperson has betrayed the original's overhead-view sensibilities and corridor-by-corridor urgency. "I wanted to bring the game up to today's standards of thirdperson camera control – so we could make sure that everything the designers made visible with their camera placement would look as good as possible," explains Romero of his decision. "It's been more of a challenge because we have to accommodate four players on screen at once, whereas most thirdperson games only deal with a singleplayer camera system."

The thirdperson perspective has also introduced an approach to combat more familiar to brawlers than dungeoneers, with Romero's stated intention to not just reproduce *Gauntlet's* fraught melee action, but to improve upon it. Players now have access to a suite of throws, blocks, counters and combo strikes beyond the magical and ranged attacks that served the original quartet so well against two-dimensional hordes. This turns out to be the fulfilment of



ROMERO JOINS THE GAME

***Seven Sorrows* marks a creative rebirth for Romero, who has personally assembled the development team in addition to heading the design until Sawyer's recruitment. "This has been the best team-building experience in my life and this, not coincidentally, has been the best team I've ever worked with," he says. "We let the team themselves interview prospective developers: they're the ones who'll have to work with this new person, so why not? We have a 13-step process for joining the team, and if you're the perfect choice, those steps go by quickly."**

It sounds as utopian – and hopefully less ultimately undoing – as his founding of Ion Storm Dallas some eight years ago. Romero is certainly back on typically unflappable form: "Creating the game has been great as well – these people are highly experienced professionals and know what they're doing. I'm really happy to be able to design levels, program subsystems and also work as creative director at the studio – it's what I'm used to doing at my own companies, and I love doing it here."



Bosses feature, and will hopefully be effectively featured by the camera while four party members attempt to down them. More familiar *Gauntlet* threats, such as monster generators and Death, return: the latter's coal-skinned reimagining is on p49

another previously repressed desire. "Actually, one of the original ideas for *Quake* was to get rid of the gun and have head-to-head combat with your enemy, while the controls were similar to the fighting game genre," Romero recalls.

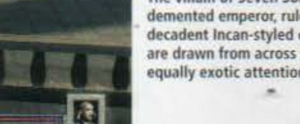
As for *Seven Sorrows*: "I looked at all the action-RPG games out there and saw that fighting was very similar to *Diablo*'s button mashing, and

"I looked at the action-RPG games out there and saw that fighting was very similar to *Diablo*'s button mashing"

I wanted to have a combat system that was more my style, with head-splitting, throat-grabbing, bloody violence – but also more advanced, like a fighting game. It had to be a balance between the simplicity of a *Diablo*-esque action game and the complexity of *Soul Calibur*-ish fighting." The early version of the game shown indicates that there's still work to be done on finding this ideal shallowness: *Seven Sorrows*' perspective demands that it stands up to comparison with considerably more elastic singleplayer action titles, and its history requires it to maintain that *Gauntlet* immediacy of button-press to response.

For every action beyond hack and slash is an introduction of a new ruleset to a game already juggling the skill and stat building of a light RPG. Sawyer describes reconciling the two as a reductive process: "We had to toss out a lot of RPG assumptions about how conflicts are resolved. That is, things in *Gauntlet* are usually resolved through button presses, not abstracted formulae. The RPG stuff is for things like damage calculation and mana regeneration, although the





The villain of *Seven Sorrows*, an undying and demented emperor, rules a sumptuously decadent Incan-styled civilisation. The heroes are drawn from across the fantasy globe with equally exotic attention to cultural detail



CONTINUED PLAY

John Romero's (left) post-Ion Storm career saw him retreat to the periphery of the industry with self-founded handheld and wireless developer Monkeystone. The company quietly produced several Pocket PC titles, in addition to handling the N-Gage port of *Red Faction* and *Area 51*'s multiplayer content. Both Romero and fellow Ion Storm/Monkeystone co-founder Tom Hall (*Anachronox*) are now working at Midway.

Josh Sawyer's (right) work at PC RPG studio Black Isle included the *Icewind Dale* series and, less happily, the string of cancelled projects leading up to the developer's demise, including a new *Forgotten Realms* title and his (and fans') dream project *Fallout 3*. Sawyer left the dying company in 2002, expressing a possibly portentous desire to explore different avenues from 'hardcore PC RPGs'.





Though the interface art is still under development, it's looking to be well-prioritised: even when all four inventory displays are open, there's a sizeable chunk of screen space left visible

TALES AND DEEDS

Although competition isn't exactly fierce in the genre, Sawyer's backstory for *Seven Sorrows* is one of the more intricate to grace an action title in recent years. "I write with the assumption that the player wants a story," he says of its depth. "*Gauntlet*'s an action game, and we have a separate story mode for a reason. If a player isn't into game stories, intentionally writing a clichéd plot with shallow characters isn't going to suddenly knock them on their ass and really amp them up about the central narrative. And if they are into game stories, obvious watering them down will turn them off."

Gauntlet's story has traditionally been told through moments of play, not sweeping tragedy, but Sawyer sees no reason for the former to be subjugated by a strong storyline: "There's the designer's narrative and the player's narrative. As long as we give the player enough tools to create their own gameplay stories, it shouldn't matter if our overall tale is linear. Goofing around with *Half-Life 2*'s physics in a big box provides people with more interesting stories than the entirety of *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale* combined."



overall system is pretty simple." Simplicity of overt and behind-the-scenes mechanics certainly isn't a hallmark of Sawyer's Black Isle background, which has seen him credited for his expertise in managing AD&D's spiraling rulesets. "My initial tendency was to go very stat-heavy. That made our control scheme very complicated, and the whole approach was anathema to *Gauntlet*'s traditional ease of use," he admits. "Action RPGs, especially the D&D-esque ones, have tended to be relatively complicated affairs these days – managing ammo, dozens of different spells, and a whole screen full of items, is anti-*Gauntlet*, even if it was inspired by *Gauntlet*. So we scaled back until we felt we were giving the player enough toys without confusing the hell out of them."

This streamlining is appreciable in *Seven Sorrows*' UI – equipment is assigned to only five slots, all accessible from an unobtrusive inventory pop-up that doesn't freeze the gameplay around it – and in the division between a narrative-driven Story mode and a looser, action-oriented Advance mode. While the Advance game can support up to four players in concert, the Story mode is limited to a single or twoplayer game – revealing the characters' entwined histories, and that of their darkening world, as they journey through it in cooperative pairs. "The reason we did it this way was to provide a much more customised story that's about the characters, not just 'Players 1-4 journey through the world in a story'," says Romero. "Going through the Story mode, you'll play all six main characters by the time you're finished, and learn about their pasts and how they resolve them."

Interestingly for his background, it also finds Sawyer happily making the case for ignoring his work on the densely plotted narrative. "The warrior, as always, starts the game as a big bare-chested blonde guy with a throwing axe. You can learn nothing else about him and play



Junction Skills are a mechanic introduction unique to *Seven Sorrows*, allowing a player to lay down a pattern of glyphs (right) that, when activated by the other players, trigger an offensive or beneficial effect within the area defined. Setting and releasing Junctions with any degree of forethought during a battle may be another matter entirely, though





Advance mode just fine. If the brand on his face intrigues you, you might want to go through the story to learn why he got it, but that knowledge certainly isn't required," he explains. "One of the characters in *Seven Sorrows*, the wizard, says: 'I am more concerned about bringing the tribes back to the stone than the stone to the tribes'. I'm not concerned about selling people on the main story. That isn't fundamentally why people play *Gauntlet*."

One such fundamental draw is the pleasure of cooperation, and the guiltier pleasure of occasionally succumbing to individual greed – so perhaps a drawback of *Seven Sorrows* leaving the arcade behind is that it also leaves the experience of having the entire party huddled around the screen. The unpredictable wiles of internet play have been addressed with design decisions such as standard treasure chests rewarding all party members with items (rare chests, however, are finders keepers) and a health recovery system that encourages players to pull their weight in combat instead of bloating on (now removed) health items – but is there still a place for old-fashioned goodwill in the age of griefers?

"You'll be able to play with four players all on the same console, so you can get a similar feeling as you had in the arcade, only deeper, because we have item trading and more in this version," assures Romero. "Over broadband you'll have more camaraderie than if you jumped in the middle of a *Counter-Strike* game because you're one of up to four characters, so the experience is a little more intimate – you don't have 20 other people running around like insane Rambos."

Counter-Strike isn't necessarily *Seven Sorrows*' rival for an online community's attention, though, and it's in this aspect that the game's break with series traditions could position it beyond the *Gauntlet*-inspired titles as a game that *is Gauntlet*. In 1985, *Gauntlet* was a passionate product of red-box Dungeons & Dragons, two-dimensional



Seven Sorrows **forgoes healing items, instead introducing the action-game mechanic of reclaiming life energy from slain foes (top). Intended to encourage aggressive play, it also means you won't be spending your spoils on scores of potions when shopping**

"You'll be able to play with four players all on the same console, so you get a similar feeling as in the arcade"

hardware and pay-for-play punchiness; where '90s follow-ups *Legends* and *Dark Legacy* disappointed was in failing to display a similar appreciation of where advances in source material and technology could lead them. *Seven Sorrows* makes a convincing design argument for being a *Gauntlet* of its time, but a greater feat will be for the gameplay to demonstrate that name's timelessness – what *Gauntlet* meant to its players, and what it can mean to newcomers. There's cause for optimism in Sawyer's response to the question of whether writing a storyline that can be freely ignored has been a strange experience: "Not at all. I just want people to have fun with the game."





HARDWARE OVERLOAD

FINALLY, THEY'RE ALL HERE: FIVE HANDHELDS ARE FIGHTING FOR A PLACE IN YOUR POCKET





With all of these consoles in your pocket (or, more likely because of practicality issues, your bag), you're covered, since each has at least one unique attribute unavailable on its competitors, whether that's GPS functionality, movies available on disc, Palm OS compatibility, a cheeky pair of screens or the ability to double-up as a phone. But only some of these will actually serve as reasons to pick one over the other – which is what your average consumer will be doing, because, just as in most gaming households when it comes to traditional consoles, there's only room, time or budget for one format.

Over the next six pages we look at each competing device in turn in an attempt to identify its place in the handheld entertainment landscape. Some of the issues discussed may make you reconsider your attitude towards certain pieces of hardware. They may not. They may make you go out and want to complete the set. In which case you can consider yourself as suffering from some gadget-lust 'issues'...

GIZMONDO



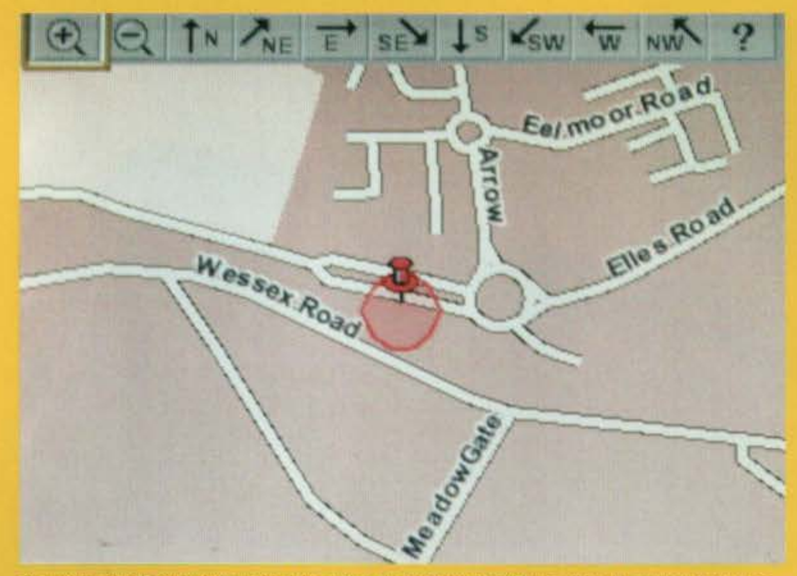
Manufacturer: Tiger Telematics
Price: £230
UK release date: March 2005

We originally expected to see finished Gizmondo hardware in December 2004, but a last-minute hardware rethink, brought about in order to give the technology more of an even footing with its competitors thanks to the implementation of an Nvidia graphics solution, meant that the hardware has only just arrived. Now, after what's been a considerable amount of talk, the device can finally be judged.

First impressions aren't bad: the matt black casing feels quite sophisticated. As strange as they may initially appear, the L and R shoulder buttons are placed comfortably enough, and the D-pad and buttons offer a typical amount of travel. Powering up the hardware, however, delivers disappointment: a 'Loading…' message appears alongside an animated Gizmondo logo and you have to wait nearly a minute before being dropped into the main menu. Compare it to how, say, Nintendo's DS lets you get going and, well, there simply is no comparison.

The frontend, however, is as user-friendly as you could wish for, being a simple selection of vertically presented options running from 'Games' through 'Movies', 'Music', 'Messaging', 'GPS', 'Camera' and beyond, each bringing up a further set of easily navigable subsections. So far, so good. But what can we do with these options? It delivers better graphics than, say, N-Gage, but right now there's nothing in terms of gaming on Gizmondo to compare to the best offerings on DS and PSP. Its camera, meanwhile, can handle images that compare horrendously against even the cheapest digital cameras but are better than most mobile phones with image-capture options. GPS? It works, but there's not yet any software to make it, say, an in-car nav tool. Music and video playback, however, aren't bad at all (though you'll want to opt for the headphone option rather than the single onboard speaker), with the sort of quality you'd expect from movie clips encoded at a decent standard, and only particularly fast-moving images and large blocks of single colours result in artefacting.

There's no doubting that Gizmondo has delivered on what it promised. Now it's a matter of whether or not its particular suite of capabilities can make sense to consumers who've already been beguiled by Nintendo's dual screens and Sony's super-hi-fidelity display technology. By spreading itself so widely, Gizmondo may not ultimately have helped itself, although when you don't have Nintendo's IP or Sony's branding, what do you do?



Once you're outside (and you've enabled the option), the hardware 'looks' for satellites. Its accuracy depends on how many it can communicate with, but at its best it'll track to within a metre. Now for the games that use it…

THERE'S NO DOUBTING THAT GIZMONDO HAS ACTUALLY DELIVERED ON WHAT IT PROMISED





Gizmondo build quality is solid enough, although its five function buttons require a large amount of force to operate. The 0.3-megapixel camera, meanwhile, delivers fairly poor, grainy images washed out by light (right)

GIZMONDO'S GAMES

TRAILBLAZER

This attractive and simple abstract puzzle-racer is the most compelling reason to use a Gizmondo to play games right now. An update of the 1986 Gremlin game, it sees you negotiating the jumps and drops of a straight and narrow neon course in the shortest time possible, hitting zips and avoiding braking squares by steering around them or using a limited number of hops. It's addictive, if a little dependent on rote learning, and levels are over in the blink of an eye: this is one handheld game that really can be played between Tube stops.

RICHARD BURNS RALLY

It's perhaps too early to judge from this demo (which is ostensibly 45 per cent complete) but the imposing realism of the home console version of SCi's rally sim may not survive its transition to the new handheld. The loose handling seems positively forgiving and accessible, the star's Subaru sliding round hairpins with ease. Graphically it is a mixed bag: the car model takes convincing damage, but the landscape is a barren, roughly textured approximation familiar from ten years ago.

COLORS

The Gizmondo's GPS locator provides tremendous potential for innovative, and necessarily unique, games. Being the first to use it makes *Colors* a critical, format-defining release. The heavy *San Andreas* influence of its urban gang warfare won't do it any harm, but the shabbily unconvincing and deserted streetscape, or the ludicrous animation and ponderous movement of the avatar, might well. The decision to make its GPS hook dependent on the presence of other Gizmondos (multiplayer is engaged by others invading your literal, real-world turf) is also highly questionable at this early stage in the machine's life.



Manufacturer: Nintendo
Price: £100
UK release date: March 2005

If anyone had an excuse for playing to safe with handhelds, it was Nintendo. After years and years of successful iteration, the company had a well-established formula of incremental improvements and a brand that had supported the world's best-selling console for 15 years. Even with Sony looming over its market, there was little to stop Nintendo offering another step up to its loyal fanbase. Instead, it ditched its most valuable possession – the Game Boy name – and struck out for left field. With over four million DSes sold so far, no one's sniggering any more.

The strength of the formula is self-evident. The DS is cheap to make and cheap to develop for, maximising profits for both manufacturer and publisher. *Meteos*, the new DS title from Miziguchi's Q? Entertainment, took three men just three days to prototype. The idea that the DS's input mechanisms would appeal to those currently alienated from gaming is already proving well founded, with Nintendo's early figures showing an unusually prominent female skew among early adopters. Touchscreen input, despite initial fears that it could prove a gimmick, has become a staple of game-interface design, if not of gameplay, to such an extent that players find themselves tapping in puzzled frustration at the screens of their N-Gages and PSPs.

The games are also strong. Despite the weakness of the launch line-up, titles such as *Band Brothers* and *Catch! Touch! Yoshi* show the DS's ability to entertain as well as innovate, and the arrival of names like *Advance Wars* and *Metroid* may do much to woo sceptical gamers convinced that it's only good for quirky puzzlers.

But despite the good news, there's no question that Nintendo's dominance in the handheld market has ended, almost certainly forever. The DS may prove a success – making money for the company and enjoyment for its owners – but it will never become synonymous with handheld gaming the way Game Boy once was. But it says a lot about the current games market when producing a profitable games machine with high-quality, innovative titles sounds like a step back.



The four new colour variations of the DS are the first in what's certain to be a long line of alternate versions. The success of GBA varients like the Tribal edition and the golden Triforce special has proved how strong the market is for these kinds of cosmetic overhauls. However, there are likely to be more fundamental revisions made to the design. Satoru Iwata has already let slip that a new version of the console is in the works, although nothing is yet known about what changes might be lined up

BEYOND NOLINE

Ignoring for the moment the GameCube's broadband adapter (as Nintendo has shown itself so willing to do), the DS stands in line to be Nintendo's first meaningfully online console. Satoru Iwata announced at GDC that the DS's online service would be unveiled at E3. It wasn't the biggest of surprises – diligent DS fans had tunnelled the DS's wireless capabilities within days of the machine's release – but what was more unexpected was that Nintendo's service will be entirely free. Iwata also pledged that set-up and connection would be entirely seamless – a common promise, but one that carries more weight when backed with an uncompromising approach to streamlined interfaces. The launch date is unannounced, but the service will be available before the end of the year, and its flagship titles are certain to be *Mario Kart* and *Animal Crossing*. What's less clear is if this is the end of the DS's online intentions. Rumours earlier this year suggested that Nintendo had licensed the Palm OS, but whether or not it uses its own software it seems almost certain at this stage that Nintendo will release additions to the DS's core functionality of an alarm clock and local picture messaging. It's been known for many months that it's possible to run an internet browser on the device, and the combination of a full online service and touchscreen input makes more sophisticated communication and organiser software almost certain.





The Play-yan media adaptor – designed for SP but compatible with DS – turns your handheld into a music and movie player, with media stored on SD cards – a cheaper, and more widely used storage format than the PSP's Memory Stick

PSP



Manufacturer: Sony
Price: TBA
UK release date: TBA

In the same way many people wouldn't buy a Dreamcast because they knew Sony's PS2 way on its way, so too Nintendo's DS was shunned by some consumers because another, much sexier-looking alternative was on its way from Ken Kutaragi's team of designers. And so it proved to be true: as we've already said, Sony's PSP is the sexiest piece of gaming hardware ever.

But it is also a piece of gaming hardware that has yet to prove itself far beyond simply looking divine. At the time of writing, US launch title *Wipeout Pure* is still without its promised online support, and upcoming software in general is looking a little thin on the ground.

So the question is: what now? Unlike Nintendo, Sony does not have a gargantuan resource of in-house staff well-versed in creating handheld entertainment, so you may have to look to thirdparty developers to deliver software that will do the hardware justice. Right now, teams in the US are taking up the baton, and a bundle of new titles from across the globe will debut at E3. However, delivering content on a device as capable as Sony's machine requires much more effort, staffing and expenditure than any other handheld platform, raising the question: which developers will be putting their key creatives to work on this format when new under-the-TV hardware from Microsoft, Nintendo and Sony itself is just around the corner, requiring the most committed efforts of any participants at a time when only real hits make money? Sony's handheld offers the opportunity for publishers to make hay while the sun shines, because now that the glow of *Ridge Racers*, *Wipeout Pure* and *Lumines* has passed, there is a real need for a second wave of worthwhile attractions.





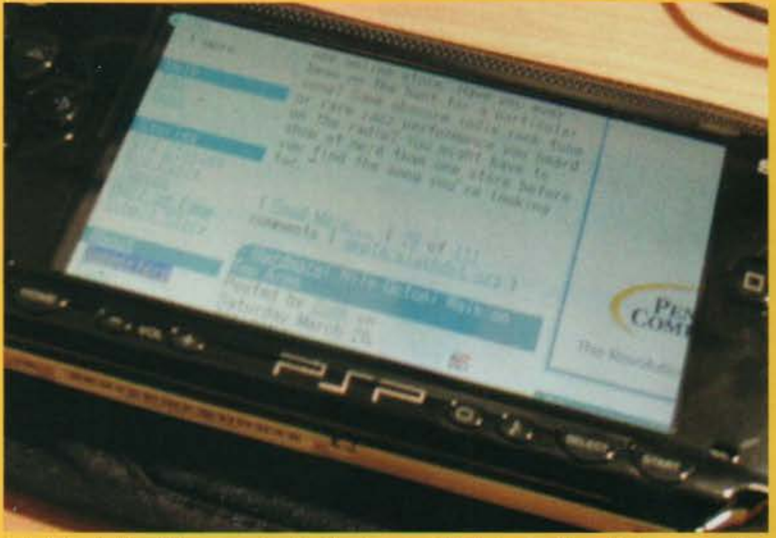
It's perhaps not a coincidence that the two titles which define the PSP's early appeal are two titles which also shaped the public's perception of the original PlayStation. Both look sensational, despite not making full use of the hardware's maximum 333MHz clock speed, a measure incorporated to lessen the strain put on existing battery technology

WILL STRANGERS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT SOON BECOME FRIENDS VIA PSPS OR DSES?

Wifi compatibility may be a valuable component in shifting those titles. *Untold Legends* (see p39) explores handheld multi-console multiplayer gameplay in a predictable manner, but other developers are hard at work on other scenarios in which several users in one location can converge upon a common task (so long as each of them has the requisite software). Will there soon come a time when strangers on public transport become friends via PSPs (or, indeed, DSes)? We shall have to see.

But gaming is clearly only one part of the PSP equation, and Sony, whose business as a whole continues to underperform, wants its handheld hardware to be perceived as a true multimedia platform, something to replace your iPod as a music player and get an early(ish) start in the video player market, which will soon be worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

It all adds up to the PSP sliding perfectly into the established PlayStation model: powerful technology with massmarket appeal, its lack of surprises countered by sheer sex appeal.



A simple tweak allows PSP owners to view (basic) web pages on their device. As with most hardware compatible with user-writeable media, Sony's console has quickly attracted a keen following among underground enthusiasts

HOLLYWOOD OR BUST?

Despite shipping in the States with a copy of the Spider-Man 2 motion picture on UMD, Sony's plans for PSP as a commercial-movie-playing format remain somewhat sketchy. Once thought to be a serious part of the format's strategy, it's looking likely that films on UMD will follow the route previously marked out by music albums delivered on MiniDisc – in other words, only a small selection may ever become available. The good news is that the hardware's UMD movie playback quality is good, and certainly better than watching highly compressed files delivered on solid-state devices.

ZODIAC 2

Manufacturer: Tapwave
Price: £150
UK release date: October 2004

The Zodiac 2 (a 128Mb follow-up to the original 32Mb Zodiac) ought to be laughing. It has every advantage: it's got the touchscreen of the DS without the clunky looks; it's got the widescreen multimedia flexibility of the PSP without the proprietary media; and it's got a cast-iron gadget-justifying use as a serious-minded palmtop. And now, less than a year after it's UK release, it can be bought for around £150, a massive drop from its £330 launch price.

And yet, as a gaming machine, it's close to being irrelevant. Look at the list of the games available now, and it's almost identical to what was being trumpeted at the machine's original launch – a small selection of badly converted or ill-advised ports like *Doom II* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*. While the Zodiac's use of Palm OS gives you access to a huge swathe of Palm games, many aren't optimised to make best use of the Zodiac's best feature – its screen – and many of the rest are clumsy clones or ports of webgames. The machine has the power to produce a worthwhile gaming experience – analogue control, a 200MHz ARM9 processor with 2D graphics acceleration, and a 480x320 resolution, 3.8-inch backlit screen, but so far nothing, not even this year's only big title, *Madden NFL 2005*, has produced a truly memorable Zodiac game.

The machine's biggest disappointment is in its use of the touchscreen. Nintendo has taken only a few months to begin flexing its creative muscles at the new gaming opportunities it affords, but the best stylus gaming Zodiac has to offer is still a basic bowling game and the simple but solidly appealing puzzler *PaintBall*. One of the genres where the Zodiac ought to be leading the field is in adventure gaming, but despite optimised versions of well-respected independent RPGs like *Aldon's Crossing*, most Zodiac gamer's wishlists are filled with games which are either on hold like *E.D.G.E* (Extreme Dungeon Game Experience) or cancelled like Atari's *Neverwinter Nights* port.



The ergonomics of the Zodiac work well whether it's held in landscape or portrait mode

Tapwave is now positioning Zodiac squarely as a multimedia device rather than a gaming machine. It's a necessary step, given the level of entertainment software support it's been able to generate, but one that doesn't let the handheld entirely off the hook. The music and video playback programs shipped with the Zodiac hardware are limited and frustrating, and most users have to invest in extra software to optimise video files and add flexibility to playback.

Tapwave's machine is still a desirable palmtop – particularly after the price drop – thanks to its sound ergonomic and aesthetic design, but it's hard to see how it can defend its gaming territory in light of the DS's innovations, or its multimedia prowess in the face of the PSP's somewhat slicker software.

THE REAL DEAL

Where the Zodiac does score is in terms of emulation. The Little John Z (or LJZ) emulation suite is one of the best presented pieces of emulation software available, and handles NES, SNES, Game Boy, Mega Drive, Neo-Geo Pocket, Wonderswan and TurboGrafx 16 games with varying degrees of success. All are presented with familiar tunes and tiny pixel portraits of each console, and the emulator uses the touchscreen interface to very good advantage. The man behind LJZ has also created launchers for *Quake*, *Hexen* and *Doom* – the latter of which offers a substantially better playing experience than the officially released Zodiac version of the game (far right). Other emulators can be more of a headache to get working, but can give you welcome access to ZX Spectrum, Atari ST, MAME and SCUMM games. A Game Boy Advance emulator is also underway, but isn't yet optimised.



The combination of an analogue stick, touchscreen, four face buttons and two shoulders shows how seriously the Zodiac was intended as a game device. Sadly, there is little software which capitalises on the design's potential



N-GAGE QD

Manufacturer: Nokia
Price: free (with contract)
UK release date: June 2004

In the course of its short lifetime, attitudes to the N-Gage have changed almost as dramatically as the device's appearance. Initial contempt, provoked mostly by the original device's preposterous design, has given way to fond affection as Nokia has continued to plug away in a market which gave it such a ferociously hostile welcome.

The QD redesign was a major part of that shift in attitudes, however. By letting you hot-swap games and losing the side-talking, the device suddenly became a viable platform rather than a fertile laughing stock. There were trade-offs – mainly the loss of the radio, tri-band capabilities and the built-in MP3 player – but while it would have been great to see a device offering the best of both worlds, it was a compromise well worth making.

The N-Gage game line-up continues to gain depth, with the regular arrival of high-profile titles like *The Elder Scrolls*, *Splinter Cell* and *X-Men Legends*, but many of the more ambitious console conversions aren't a good fit for the device, and its portrait screen and digital controls have not make the job any easier. Many others offer little more than versions available for other Series 60 phones with a hefty price increase. The best dedicated games are, unsurprisingly, those designed by Nokia's in-house teams to take full advantage of the N-Gage's specific capabilities. *Pocket Kingdoms: Own The World*, though menu-heavy and clunky, has a great deal of character and succeeds in its aim of offering a mobile, truly online RPG playable in the smallest bites. *Pathway To Glory*, the platform's flagship title, deserves its position and IOMO's *Snakes* – despite taking a hatefully long time to load – updates and elaborates the original's appeal without damaging its core mechanics.



Yes, the original really was that bad

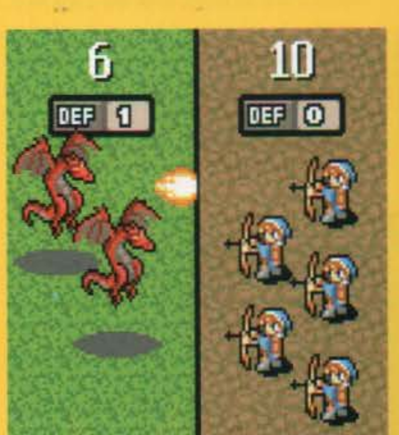
CONTEMPT PROVOKED BY THE ORIGINAL'S DESIGN HAS GIVEN WAY TO FOND AFFECTION

But for many – as even Nokia is willing to admit – the N-Gage's gaming strength lies not in its own games, but in the opportunity it offers for running Series 60 and Java games on the comfort of a device designed for gaming rather than talking. The best of these – eye-catching shooters like *Sky Force* and strategy titles like the *Advance Wars*-style *Ancient Empires* – probably provide a better ratio of gaming enjoyment to retail price than any other commercial handheld games.

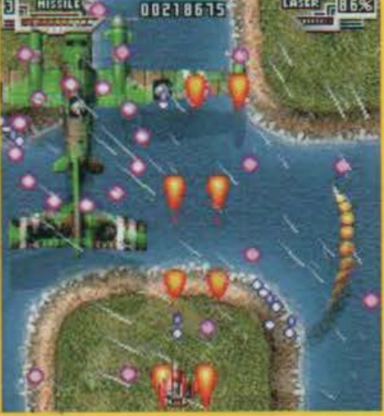
In some respects, the N-Gage could never have been a failure, no matter how badly it sold. It was Nokia's learning console, a live-action experiment for a company that wanted to move into an arena it had no direct experience of. There's no question that it made some of the biggest and most public mistakes the industry has seen for a while, but games like *Pathway To Glory* and the 200,000-strong online gaming community make it clear that Nokia has found the experiment a fruitful – if not a profitable – one.

THE SECOND COMING?

Pre-E3 speculation is always rife, but it seems certain that Nokia will unveil a new version of the QD, if not an entirely new N-Gage, this May. Gerard Wiener, director of Nokia's games business programme, confirmed at GDC that an announcement would be made in the coming months about a new look and feel for the QD. Specs in circulation are certainly interesting reading – suggesting a 300MHz processor with PowerVR MBX 3D graphics acceleration and a 640x480 resolution – and would see the machine producing a visual standard that would put the cat among the pigeons. However, there's little reason to put weight to those rumours: the most likely outcome is that this E3 will see a cosmetic enhancement of the QD and Nokia will hold off on a full follow-up machine until the 3G network is more widely established.







Nokia's commitment to IOMO's new version of *Snakes* (centre) is a perfect illustration of the company's slightly misguided devotion to the gaming cause. Available as a free download, the game is exclusive to N-Gage. But non-exclusive games like *Ancient Empires* (left) and *Sky Force* (right) can still give it a run for its money in terms of enjoyment

WHERE NOW?



Nintendo's DS launch made it the fastest-selling console to date in the UK, shifting 87,000 hardware units over its launch week compared to 69,000 GameCubes, the previous best-performing hardware, for the same period. Meanwhile, in the States, Sony's western PSP launch has rolled out relatively smoothly: the company made a million units available on day one, which served to fully satisfy demand (indeed, many stores came nowhere near selling out on launch day). But these two consoles were Sure Things. Their rivals, one brand new, the others having hung in there for some time, aren't so much not in the same league as not even playing the same sport.

The biggest issue concerning the handheld gaming scene is simply choice. From a gamer's perspective, the fact that five handhelds now vie for your attention is a double-edged sword, since on the one hand the appearance of competing platforms has forced the price of a Zodiac down to £150 – representing tremendous value for money when you consider its worth as a decent PDA, let alone as a capable gaming device – while on the other you're faced with this simple question: who on earth is going to supply high-profile software for so many platforms? And here there are obvious parallels with the traditional console landscape: Sony's PSP will attract buyers who'll want it for *Pro Evo* and *GTA* the same way they had to buy its bigger PS2 brother for the fully fledged iterations of those franchises. If you don't have the franchises, typical mainstream gaming appeal will not be yours.

THE BIGGEST ISSUE IS CHOICE: WHO IS GOING TO SUPPLY GAMES FOR SO MANY MACHINES?

Nintendo's solution is to ignore typical mainstream gaming appeal and go for *genuine* mainstream appeal, tapping into the consciousness of those who've never really considered gaming as an activity with relevance to their lives. According to early data, it's a strategy with some legs.

It leaves the Gizmondo, N-Gage and Zodiac hardware playing catch-up. In truth, Tapwave's machine will always be simply a cute also-ran. And, for this generation at least, N-Gage will never be more than a well-funded initiative that had some good ideas but never quite hit its stride. Gizmondo? Well, Gizmondo's still only a month or so old. Let's see how these games actually pan out...

In the meantime, below we identify eight of the titles that will define the way handheld gaming as a whole will be shaped in the coming year.



Animal Crossing DS **looks like the game best calibrated to exploit all aspects of its hardware. Fully online, the touchscreen will be crucial for writing letters to friends and designing new shirt patterns**



E.D.G.E **tops many Zodiac owners' most-wanted list, but the man behind it has indefinitely suspended development on the** ***Diablo*****-inspired RPG. It's a game Tapwave itself should probably consider backing**



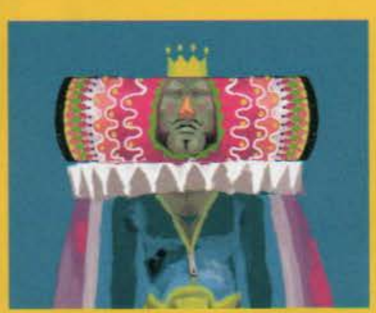
Colors**, despite its current shortcomings, remains the Gizmondo's most promising title. The company continues to promise dramatic new announcements of big-name game deals, but these are yet to happen**



The PSP version of ***GTA*** **doesn't share the world of the PS2's** ***San Andreas*** **(above), set instead in Liberty City, but that premise alone will be enough to convince many fans to invest in the handheld**



Infected **is undoubtedly one of the PSP's most exciting thirdparty titles, promising to use its zombie infection storyline to exploit the machine's local multiplayer and online wifi potential to the full**



There's no question that the demographics of DS fans and ***Katamari Damacy*** **fans must overlap with almost geometric precision, so it's little surprise to hear of a DS version, no doubt with innovative new controls**



Though Backbone's ***Death, Jr.*** **for PSP received the attention last year,** ***Rifts*** **– an N-Gage adaptation of the cult, and dauntingly sprawling, tabletop roleplaying game – is its more ambitious project**

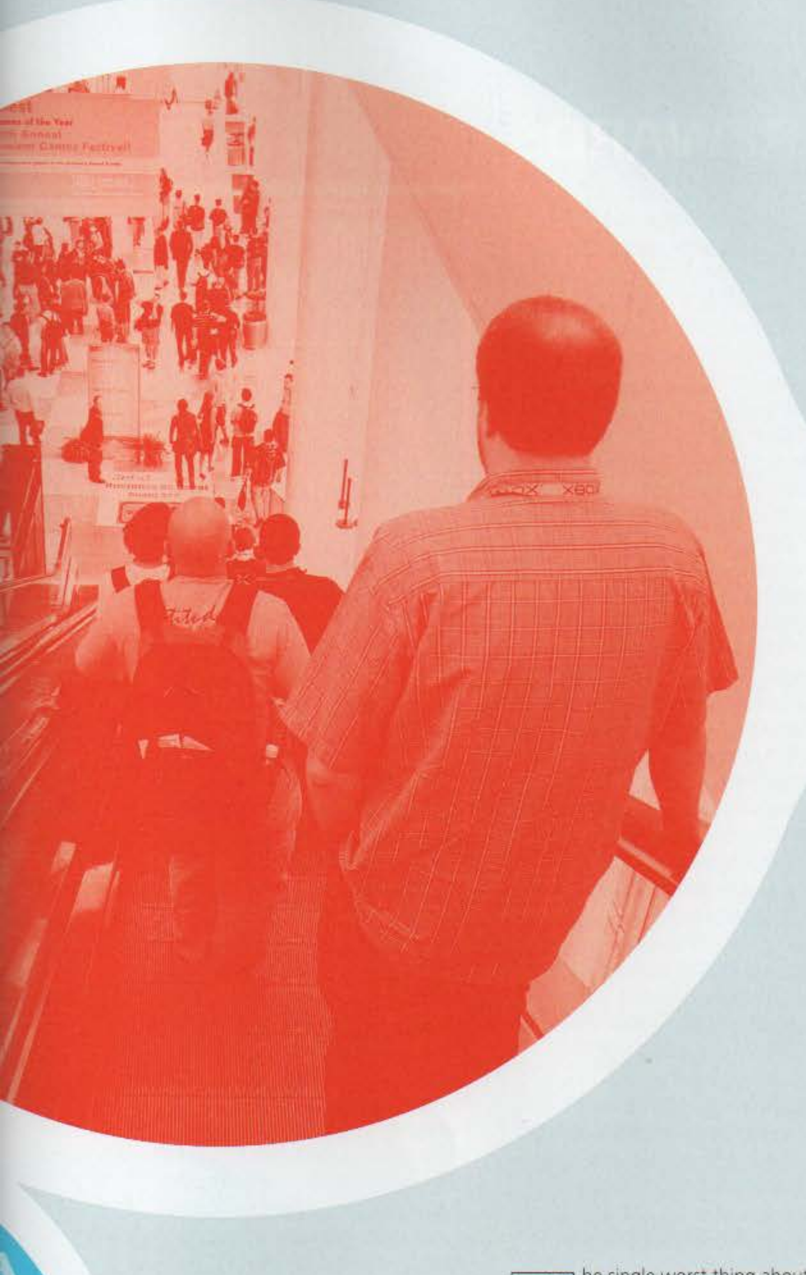


From the southern hemisphere comes Sony's other guaranteed PSP seller. ***Crisis Core*** **is the only FFVII spin-off which is actually an RPG and actually by the game's original director, but it's not due until 2006**

CONFERENCE CALL

PICKING THE BEST FROM GDC 2005 IS A CLOSE-TO-IMPOSSIBLE TASK, BUT HERE ARE THE WORDS – AND THE GAMES – WHICH HAD THE GREATEST IMPACT





The single worst thing about GDC is how much of it you have to miss. Hour-long slots quickly become quintuple-booked as rival sessions vie for your attention. Producing coverage of the event suffers from the same problem – it would take a sizeable book to cover the ground that the conference ranged over in less than a week. Here, however, is a selection of the best moments, starting with Keito Takahashi's presentation on the making of *Katamari Damacy*. It's hard to overstate that title's currency among US developers this year – it's become a handy shorthand, a blueprint for everything many people wish the videogame industry was doing and fear it never will again. Hearing the specific circumstances surrounding its creation, however, drums home how unusual and particular the geneses of such creative projects often are. Following that is a transcript of the electrifying 'Rants' session. Controversial and unpredictable, it speaks for itself.

Alongside these are the games which best represented the independent and experimental traditions of game design. These have long been a mainstay of GDC, and are a refreshing antidote to the big-budget blandness which swamps other industry events. Even these traditions, however, are changing: *Wik And The Fable Of Souls*, one of the winners of the Independent Game Festival, had a development budget of $350,000. The presence of *Alien Hominid*, with a budget of $1.3 million, in the nominations dragged the average cost of development for a game entering the awards to close to $50,000. What the Festival – and the Experimental Gameplay session – showed, however, was that no matter how much budgets inflate, the amount of uncharted game territory never seems to decrease, and the existence of all those as-yet-unexplored styles, dynamics and interfaces might just have inspired the next *Katamari*.

KATAMARI: RISKS AND REWARDS

Keita Takahashi, in his talk 'Rolling The Dice: The Risks And Rewards Of Developing *Katamari Damacy*', spoke about the frustrations which lay behind *Katamari*'s genesis: "I'd been at Namco for two years and it did not look good that I hadn't participated in a game which had been completed. I had to get involved in a project which had already been green-lit, but there was nothing that appealed to me. It was a personal crisis." He described the scepticism with which his game was met and expressed his gratitude towards Namco for supporting the project and his amazement that it kept its Japanese name for its American release ("If a simple game like *Katamari Damacy* can be popular even in the west, maybe the world isn't such a bad place after all"). But what garnered the strongest reaction from the GDC crowd was his passionate and self-effacing explanation for his original inspiration: "How did I get the idea for *Katamari*? Well, on a visit to the zoo, I saw a panda bear being rolled around by her children. That's actually a lie! Actually, I invented the idea behind *Katamari*, but it's not that it just came to me. There was something that triggered it: the desire to do something meaningful. I came up with a list of the things that I think all videogames should do: they should be new, easily understood, enjoyable and funny and they should feature things you can only do in a videogame. These are things that everyone thinks about in game design, but if you look at the shelves, you see the opposite – games that are all very complicated, and all very similar. When we look at the choices we have, they are really very narrow.

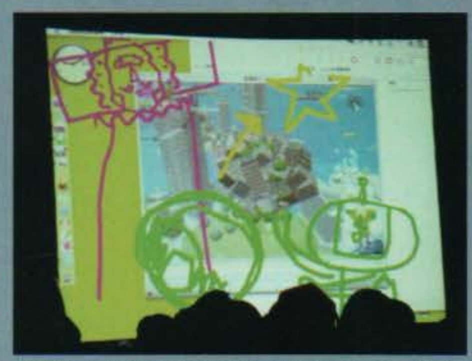
"So I've been thinking about what place games have in the world, about where they fit in with politics, education, food – all the things people have to do from birth to death. What I realised is that games are absolutely unnecessary. If they disappeared tomorrow the only people who will be in trouble are the developers and shop owners. There would be chaos for a while, and then the world would smooth itself out. So for games to matter they have to excite people, they have to have stimulating punk rock elements or there's no reason for their existence. Shooting things and killing people isn't really stimulating, and it isn't really new.

"But even though I wanted to make a game which could be understood by everyone, I don't think simplicity is necessarily good. As you go through life you feel sadness and happiness, tears and laughter, you sweat, you get angry, you stop taking to anyone at all. Now, all these things are intertwined and often we can express them in one simple word: 'love'. So you can express complex things in simple ways.

"But I don't think games are heading that way, towards trying to convey complex situations in one word. It's a big challenge for games to take that on. In *Katamari*, I wanted to take on things like love and the meaning of youth, but unfortunately I'm just not skilled enough. And I wouldn't be happy if people were just playing games for hours and children were sitting inside on their own instead of playing outside. But in my games I'm not trying to help people escape or vent frustration. I think games should be a happy part of life. I want to try to represent the feelings of love or of being young.

"Before I was a game designer I studied sculpture – I chose it because even though one is able to produce a beautiful image, I felt it wasn't equal to the pleasure of being able to feel something with your hands. The first two years were spent learning basic skills – figures of animals and humans. But for the latter two years we could make anything we wanted, with one rule – we had to be able to explain its meaning to our professors. That was a big headache for me. What was I trying to say? From that time on, I was very confused. You can make beautiful things, sure, but they're never going to be as beautiful as things in nature. So even though artists and writers can make beautiful things, I'm never sure how much they are really contributing to society. In their heads they might think, 'Oh, I'm so great' – but that might just be in their heads. And while they think that, all around us is trash – we have a trash problems, an oil problem, we have wars, conflicts, problems at home.

"IN KATAMARI, I WANTED TO TAKE ON THINGS LIKE LOVE AND THE MEANING OF YOUTH, BUT UNFORTUNATELY I'M NOT SKILLED ENOUGH"



Takahashi doodled onscreen throughout his presentation, much to the delight of the adoring crowd, who gave him a standing ovation

Maybe I was young and naive, but I found that very troubling.

"So I was thinking about what I could contribute for those two years, and what I came up with was that I wanted to make something that made people happy. Something that made them laugh for a minute and I thought if I could make them happy, then people would want to rush off to work, and their countries would stop being involved in conflicts. In extreme cases I thought it might stop racial discrimination and wars. So this is what I came up with. It's a coffee table which turns into a robot. But it can't transform on its own, it needs two people to cooperate to change it. So it's really a communication tool. And I made a giant tissue box holder shaped like a hippo – in Japanese hippo is 'kaba' and cover is 'kaba', so it's a kabakaba. And I made a flowerpot that is shaped like a goat. When you water the flowers in the back, the goat pees out the excess water. I made these things to try to prevent war from ever happening in the world. Those who touched my sculpture – if nothing else, they smiled. That made me happy.

"So when I starting thinking about my career, I thought I would become a game designer. I thought the videogame industry sold pleasure. So I joined Namco. I thought it would be fun. But it wasn't. But when you play *Katamari Damacy*, you may feel that it's a peaceful and mellow experience. For me, those feelings are very important in Japan at the moment, because of all the criticisms of violent games. If games can have a violent impact, then why shouldn't we make ones that have a positive impact?"

DYADIN



***Dyadin*, developed at the University of Southern California, is designed to be played cooperatively over two networked PCs. Each player sees their own version of a maze, and players must work together to escape. Each character can send out a sonar-style 'ping' which shatters glass gates and destroys enemies. The twist? Everything is colour coded and the characters are blue when far apart, green when near and yellow when close up.**

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

The 'Burning Down the House: Game Developer Rants' session brought together a panel of 'illustrious curmudgeons' to air whatever grievances about the videogame industry were pricking them most painfully. The result was unquestionably the most electrifying session at this year's event, with rapturous applause and cathartic hysterics meeting presentations which veered closer to stand-up than they did to soapboxing. These were informal talks, with speakers at pains to point out they did not necessarily reflect the opinions of their employers. They were designed not to be the definitive statement on any given issue, but to provoke debate and to shoo these important issues out of back-room bitching sessions into the public limelight. We look forward to your letters.

Warren Spector departed his role as studio director at Ion Storm earlier this year after the studio faltered following development of *Deus Ex: Invisible War* and *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. He has just announced the establishment of his own studio, Junction Point. His rant started out by painting a picture of an industry which was 'hopelessly broken' (a statement that raised the first whoops of the session) and he soon zeroed in on what he sees as the real problem – before running out of time at the end:

"Wal-Mart drives development decisions now, because the publishers are unwilling or unable to push back on the guy who decides how many copies of your game go on the shelves and for how low. When publishers start minimising risk by kow-towing to the retailers instead of players, you've got a real problem. They go after the sure thing, but so often the sure thing isn't as sure as people hoped. When every game has to either be a blockbuster or a student film, we've got a real problem. At my end of the business, all of our efforts are going into trying to reach a mainstream audience who may well even not be interested in what we do. The idea that my next game is going to cost, you know, woah million dollars compared to my first game which cost me $273,000 and got me into trouble as a result, that's actually terrifying me. In order to minimise risk – how many people here work with publishers who insist on focus testing everything? And how many people actually work on games that make money? Yeah, exactly. Because according to one industry pundit who I won't name, who may have been lying – and I may be lying second hand – four out of five games lose money. Despite the fact that we go for the sure thing, we focus-test concepts and we focus-test this and focus-test that. I mean, frankly, if we just trusted the creatives a little bit more, could we actually do any *worse*?

"But with all these things going on, the big problem is this: we're the only medium that I can think of that lacks an alternate distribution system. All we have is boxed games sold at retail. This is changing a little. But think about our competition for your entertainment dollar. Movies have theatre release, pay-per-view, cable, DVD, VHS, you name it. TV has first run, reruns, DVDs, you name it. Books have hardback, paperback, audio book, e-book. Every medium has a variety of ways to make money. We have: 'Just put it on the shelf at Wal-Mart, and it sells or it doesn't' and 'Oh my God, you just *blew* ten million dollars'. You look at those problems, and you take this no-risk, mainstream, focus-tested crap and put it in a box on a shelf and it's done. But I don't blame that on publishers. And that whole 'developers should just stand up and go on strike and say no and do all whatever and everything would be great' – I think that's crazy. Publishers not respecting developers, that's not the problem. Gutless developers is not the problem. The problem is that we have a flawed distribution model.

"There are very few ways of getting a game done these days, at least in my experience. Money comes from and returns to the same business – the publisher. Why should developers own anything in that model? Why should we get a huge return in that model? OK, we're taking some of the risk, but that $10m belongs to somebody else, that marketing budget belongs to somebody else, that retail space belongs to someone else. The end result is that we have winner-takes-all business that carries a lot of risk. And that's what we have to change. We have to find alternative sources of funding. Chris Crawford used to rant about how we need patrons and I used to think that was a little crazy, but I don't care if it's wealthy patrons, I don't even care who it is, but it's *critical* that we divorce funding from distribution. That's really key.

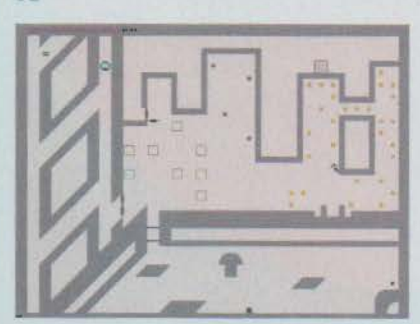
"In addition, we need alternative forms of distribution. Not a replacement for publishers – I'm not saying publishers suck. [Laughs] Although I do believe that in many cases. And I'm not saying 'If the

GISH



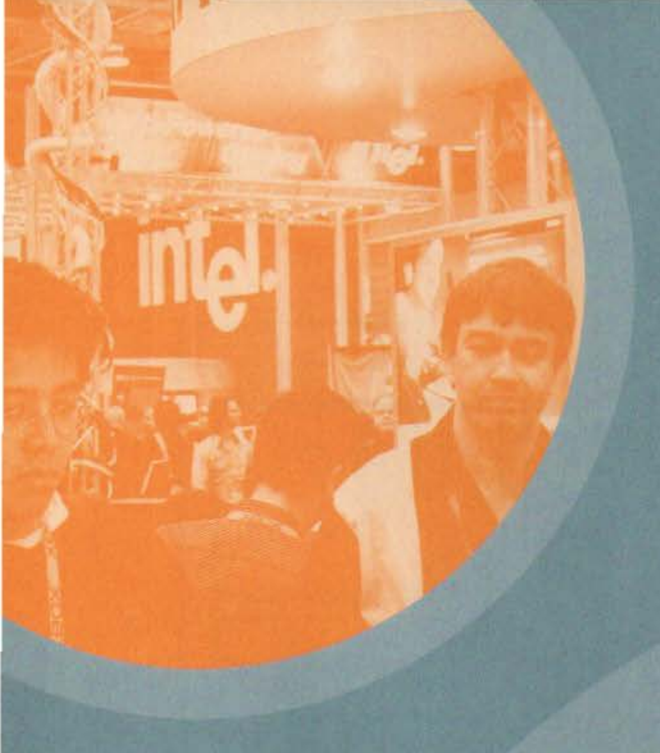
Available for download for some time now, *Gish*'s gleaming lump of charismatic gloop has attracted a loyal following. In common with a number of entrants in this year's festival, *Gish*'s appeal hinges on its use of physics, as you take advantage of your tarry charge's ability to swap between being heavy, slippy or sticky to navigate conventional environments in entirely unconventional ways. Made for $5,000, *Gish* won the open award for gameplay innovation.

N



Another physics darling, *N* is all about ninjas, eyestrain and brainfreeze. The super-minimalist levels represent both a cerebral puzzle and a pure twitch-gaming challenge. Controlling your tiny ninja as he catapults off walls and builds up enough inertia to arc him halfway across the screen is as thrilling as it is infuriating. Map modding is a fairly straightforward process and the game has already built up a lively community (www.harveycartel.org/metanet).





plane went down who would care about the marketing guys?' What we need is another way other than bricks-and-mortar stores of getting games out there and in players' hands. Now, if any of you bought *Half-Life 2* at Wal-Mart, just leave now. Get out. I'm not kidding. Go. Steam is a great start. Has everybody in the room bought BioWare's online modules? I don't even care if you don't have the original game, just buy the damn online modules. This is the concept of games on demand. If you're not supporting it, then you're actively hurting your own business. We have to find other ways to get games into players' hands that don't involve traditional distribution methods. So I'm not saying publishers are evil, I'm not saying they suck. But if we do all that and go direct to our consumers with games funded some other way than EA or whoever, then we'll keep more of the money – we have to find someone to pay for this first and then find a buyer after for what we make. Just try to find some way of funding your stuff that doesn't come from a publisher... At the very worst, we need publishers to recognise that they have to ask more than that one question. When you have one funding source, you only have one question about a game and that is: 'Is this going to generate maximum profit?' For a lot of games that is not the right question. Even the freaking car companies know that, OK. Volkswagen owns Rolls Royce; they understand there's a need to do something for something other than simple profit – aw, the music's starting. I'm out of here. Thank you!"

Greg Costikyan, whose background is originally in tabletop games and who now works for Nokia's games research wing, is a reliably acidic essayist, as his choice of URL (www.costik.com) indicates rather neatly.

"I don't know about you but I could have been a lawyer, or a carpenter, or a sous chef. And before I go any further I'm going to ask you a question. How many of you are here because developing is just a job and you're after a pay cheque? [One man raises his hand, provoking general laughter.] Uh-huh. And how many of you are here because you love games? [All hands go up.] At GDC this year, one thing has become very clear to me. With the arrival of the next generation of consoles, the cycle is going to be ratcheted up another notch. We're going to go from $5 million dollar budgets to eight figure ones. We're going to go from dev teams in the dozens to dev teams in the hundreds. It's all going to get bigger. But is it going to get *better*? This history of the past few decades of gaming is not, as you have been sold, about increases in processing power and better graphics, but of a startling burst of innovation and creativity. That's why we love games. But it's *over now*.

"As recently as 1992 the average budget for a PC game was $200,000. Today that number is $5 million and come the next-generation game it will be more like $20m. Publishers, as a consequence, are becoming increasingly conservative. So we get *Driver 69, Grand Theft Auto: San Infinitum*. Today you cannot get an innovative title published unless your last name is Wright or Miyamoto. How many of you were at the Microsoft keynote? I don't know about you but it made my *flesh crawl*. The HD era? Bigger, louder! More photorealistic 3D, teams of hundreds! Big bucks to be made! Well, not by you and me, of course. Those budgets and those teams ensure the death of innovation. Was your allegiance bought at the price of a television? Then there was the Nintendo keynote. Nintendo, of course, is the company that has brought us to this precipice. This was the company who established the business model that is crucifying the industry today. Nintendo said: 'Pay us a royalty not on sale, but manufacture'. Nintendo said: 'We will decide what games will be published', ostensibly to prevent another crash like that of '83, but in reality to quash any innovation but their own. Iwata-san says he has the heart of a gamer, and my question is what poor bastard's chest did he carve it from? And how often do they perform human sacrifices at Nintendo?

"My friends, we are *fucked*. [Huge cheer.] We are well and truly fucked. The bar in terms of graphics and glitz has been raised and raised until no one can afford to risk anything at all. The sheer labour involved has increased exponentially until our only option is permanent crunch and mandatory 80-hour weeks – at least until our jobs are all outsourced to Asia. And with these stakes, risk must be avoided, but risk is what drives innovation and innovation is what drives growth in games. But it's all OK, because the HD era is here and there are big bucks to be made. So what we get is more photorealistic drivers and shooters with ever higher polygon counts. What happens is that our idea of innovation becomes blowing into a microphone. I say: enough. The time has come for revolution! It may seem to you that what I describe are inevitable forces of history, and there's some truth in that, but fundamentally we have free will and our current plight is the consequence of individual choices. EA could have chosen to concentrate on innovation, rather than continually raising the graphic bar to squeeze out less well-capitalised competitors, but they did not. Sony could have chosen to create a Miramax of the game industry, funding dozens of sub-million titles in a process of planned innovation to establish new world-beating game styles, but they declined. Nintendo could make dev kits cheaply available to small firms, with the promise of funding and publication to the most interesting titles, but they prefer to rely on the creativity of one ageing designer.

"You have choices, too. You can take the blue pill, or the red pill. You can go work for the machine, work mandatory 80-hour weeks in a

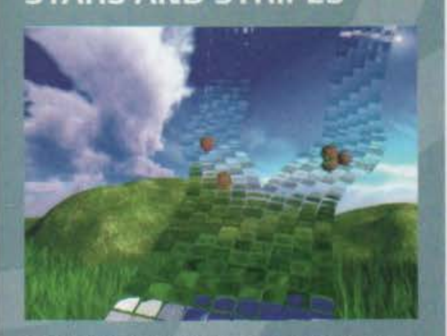
"THE BAR IN TERMS OF GRAPHICS AND GLITZ HAS BEEN RAISED AND RAISED UNTIL NO ONE CAN AFFORD TO RISK ANYTHING AT ALL"

RAG DOLL KUNG-FU



Developed in his spare time by Mark Healey, an artist working at Lionhead, *Rag Doll Kung Fu* was the darling of the Experimental Gameplay session. Characters are controlled by tugging at each limb with the mouse, resulting in a spectacularly graceful kind of live-action puppetry. Seeing a homebrew game with such stye, as well as a whole suite of extras – including online play, character editors and movie makers – brought the crowd to its feet.

STARS AND STRIPES



Stars and Stripes caught a lot of attention at the Independent Game Festival, mostly thanks to the bright gleam of its glass-brick racing tracks. The least polished of the games selected here, it's still worthy of attention for its pragmatic approach to balancing skill levels in multiplayer racing games: the track builds itself ahead of you as you race, and players are given weapons of differing power depending on their overall position in the race.

massive sweatshop publisher-owned studio with hundreds of other drones, labouring to build the new, compelling photorealistic driving game with the same basic gameplay as *Pole Position*. Or you can defy the machine.

"You can choose to starve for your art, to beg, borrow or steal the money you need to create a game that will set the world on fire. You can choose to riot in the streets of Redwood City, to down your tools and demand an honest wage for an honest eight-hour day. You can choose to find an alternate distribution channel, a different business model, a path out of the trap the game industry has set itself. You can choose to remember why we love games – and to ensure that, a generation from now, there are still games worthy of our love.

"And you can start today."

Brenda Laurel has been working in games since she joined Atari in 1976. Having published a range of books on game design issues, and currently serving as the chair of the graduate Media Design Program at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, she started her rant from a very different perspective. Arguing that the spectacle of games teaches players that the power they wield with a joypad is more meaningful that the power they have in the real world, she argued for some of gaming's greatest taboos: meaning and decency.

"Let's talk about *GTA: San Andreas*. In my research, I talked to 22 little boys – eight- to 12-year-old boys – in LA, and all of them wanted to play that game. But with only one exception, the thing that they wanted to do was to be able to drive by their house. They weren't interested in stealing cars. Or the criminals. Or the backstory. They weren't interested in simulation. They were interested in driving by their house. You talk to these boys, you talk to skaters, and they're not interested in being gangsters. They're pro-social. They say if they won the lottery they'd buy a house for their mom 'cos she works really hard.

"But what we give boys in the games that they play models for them what personal power is and what masculinity is. We model male ethos in the games that we design, and we give them very limited choices: super-athlete, criminal, soldier. But skaters are mainstream now. Skaters are ascendant now. The boy culture hierarchy goes: skaters, then wannabe skaters, ballers, then wannabe ballers, wannabe gangsters, then gangsters. And that's pretty cool, but I don't see us acknowledging that in the kinds of games that we make for them. We have two models of alpha maleness in games: the astronaut and the soldier. And there have to be more than two constructions of successful masculinity in our culture or you guys will never reproduce. We need heroes, but what kind of heroes are we creating? Where's Cesar Chavez or John Glenn or Malcolm X? Where's the fucking Governator? There hasn't been a game about geopolitics that was worth a shit since *Hidden Agenda*! We should be giving people rehearsals for citizenship and rehearsals for change. We are the wellspring of popular culture. We have a responsibility."

Chris Hecker has recently joined Will Wright's team at EA, and is currently working on *Spore*. One of the original founders of the Indie Game Jam, he's now uniquely well-placed to observe the tensions between indie-scale creativity and EA-scale technology. His rant presented a devastatingly cogent theory for why games are going to get worse.

"I'm going to rant about how Sony and Microsoft are about to screw your game design. Here's the question: how are we going to get where gameplay, graphics and physics are all evenly well-balanced? At the moment we're a 120lb weakling, except his right arm, his graphics arm, is enormous. How do we balance it up?

"So, there are two types of code in a game, basically. There's gameplay code and engine code. Engine code, like graphics and physics, has really giant data structures and then takes a relatively simple algorithm and just grinds away on it. And that kind of code really isn't that hard to write. It's pretty well defined now what that code does. The second type of code we have is AI and gameplay code. It has lots of exceptions – even in a non-simulation game there's tunable parameters, indirections, and it's a mess. Compared to some of my elegant physics simulator code, it's horrible, but this is the code that makes the game *feel different*. This is the type of code we want it to be easier to write, so we can do more experimental stuff. Here is the terrifying realisation about the next-generation consoles. I'm about to break about a ton of NDAs here, but I never signed them anyway, so that's probably OK. Here we go.

"Gameplay code will get slower and harder to write on the next generation of consoles. Why is this? Modern CPUs use what's called out-of-order execution, which is basically there to make really crappy code run fast. What it meant when it was introduced was that it annoyed a whole bunch of low-level assembly coders in Sweden, because now the crappiest C code that Joe Junior could write is running as fast as their assembly and there's nothing they could do about it. Because what an out-of-order chip does is re-order all that crappy-ass code to make it run smooth and fast. But Xenon and Cell are both in-order chips. But what does this do to our code? It's great for grinding symmetric algorithms on floating- point numbers, but for actual interaction it totally sucks. How do we quantify 'totally sucks'? Well, 'rumours' quote unquote – which happen to be from people actually working on these chips – say that straight-line gameplay code runs at one third to one tenth of the speed at the same clock rate on an in-order core as on an out-of-order core. And that means that the your new fancy 2GHz+ CPU in a Xenon is going to run code as slow or slower than the 733MHz CPU in the Xbox. The PS3 will be even worse. This sucks."

WIK



Wik And The Fable of Souls, to give it its full name, won awards for both game design and artistic innovation. It's easy to see why: the moody organics of its presentation tie in neatly to its revolutionary control scheme, which requires you to swing from the scenery with your sticky, stretchy tongue and is controlled entirely with the mouse. The result is a tactile, satisfying game which exploits the scope of an often underused input device.

Illustration: www.mdi-digital.com



Beyond the valley of the ragdolls

Previously limited to sets of simple variables, new console and PC hardware will give game physics a massive performance shift. But what will be the actual effect? We hit GDC, looking for answers

San Francisco, Moscone West Convention Centre. March 10, 2005. Everyone is excited; everyone's always excited at the start of the Game Developers Conference. The graphics guys are excited about high dynamic range lighting, the modelling guys are excited about subdivisional surfaces, the networking guys are excited about ad-hoc wireless multiplayer, the artificial intelligence guys are excited about realtime machine learning. Hey, it's going to be a great show. But it's the physics guys who are really excited.

They say 2005 is going to be the year of physics. Of course, they have said this every year since companies such as MathEngine and Havok launched their realtime physics engines at the end of the 1990s. This year it's going to be different, though. For one thing they can point to the success of *Half-Life 2*, a title that incarnated physics into gameplay thanks to the introduction of the gravity gun. "It's been an education for game designers as well as the players," say the physics guys. "Once you've experienced the variety of situations made available by physics, designers will want to implement it and players will demand it."

The other reason 2005 is claimed as the year of physics is hardware. With both Sony and Microsoft claiming their next consoles will boast one teraflop of processing power (as a rule of thumb, that's 150 times as powerful as PlayStation2), 2005 will

Getting into character

One of the trends for game physics in recent years has been animation. The first attempt was made with the integration of MathEngine's Karma engine into *Unreal Tournament 2003* to drive the motion of ragdoll characters. However, this was generally limited to the type of physics Valve's Gabe Newell has since referred to as 'flopping-around corpses' as it only modelled the impact of forces and collisions on inanimate skeletons.

Since then, physics companies have been working on using their engines' physics in a more flexible manner. "The most exciting thing for me at GDC this year was seeing people experimenting with procedural animation," says James Golding, a one-time MathEngine employee who moved to Epic to help with the initial Karma work. He's since joined the developer fulltime and works programming physically based animation within the Unreal engine. "This is more than just the physics of the body," he explains. "Instead, it's taking a higher-level view of the character, where you want to 'direct' your scene instead of meticulously controlling the movement of every bone."

Various methods are being attempted, from using physics to drive muscle-based skeletons to working on parameterising walk cycles so animators can easily vary the mood or posture. "Having characters interact believably with a varied environment is so hard to do with traditional blending, I think this is going to be an active area for years to come," Golding says. "Our crates now move as good as they look – it's time to start doing the same for our creatures." Havok's Collins tells a similar story: "Animation is a big push for us," he says. "We've been involved with the digital content companies since we first launched Havok, especially the likes of Discreet, and we're spending a lot of time making sure we work well with those packages as well as providing the sort of tools animators need."

One feature he's particularly proud of in this respect is the ability of Havok Animation to enable ragdolls to get back on to their feet again. "We've all seen ragdolls being blown up and falling down stairs, but for realistic game physics, players now expect them to be able to get up again," he says. "It's a tricky problem to solve because you can't predict the position of the character's limb which makes it hard for the animator to get them to stand up again in a smooth and realistic manner." But a combination of Havok's optimised run-time foot-IK system (which pins a character's foot to the floor) as well as its previewing tools allows the animators to do just that. "Physics engines aren't about lines of code any more," Collins says. "It's about creating the sort of tools that artists and level designers can use to get physics into their games as well as enabling coders to debug and analyse the performance. Tools are what we spend most of our time on."

certainly mark the first time massmarket gaming hardware has had the capability to handle detailed physical simulations. In particular, it is Sony's Cell chip, each of which contains eight parallel coprocessors connected by an extremely fast bus, which is getting the physics guys really excited. This is because this open architecture offers them the potential to solve the complex mathematical equations to create in-game physics in one single task. To the physics guys, at least, the Cell looks like one big physics chip.

"We can't wait for Cell," says Havok's chief technical officer **Steve Collins**. "As a heavy-duty processor, it's ideal for physics and we're already working to optimise our engine for it."

"It makes real sense to take the maximum power available at any instance and use it to calculate all the physics in one go," agrees **Marcus Lysén**, product manager of rival physics engine developer Meqon. "Games are often dependent on the results coming out of the physics engine, so if you don't do it simultaneously, you often get lag, which is something players can experience in terms of sluggish controls."

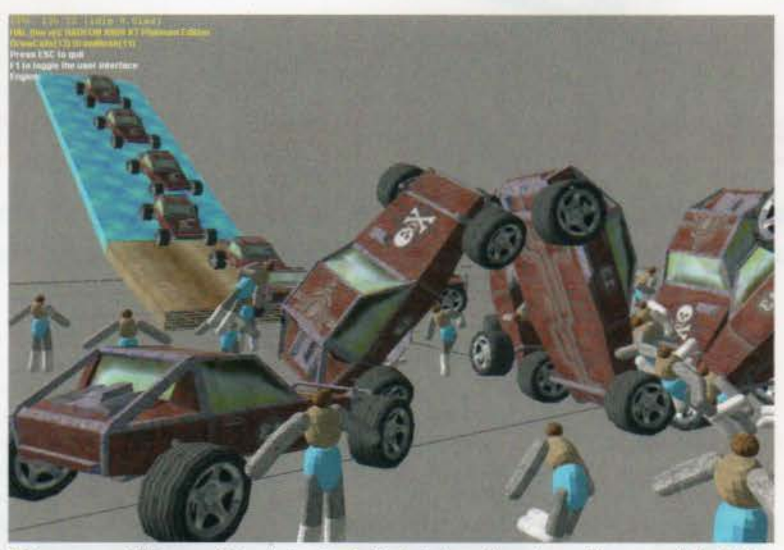
The percentage of the processing capacity of PlayStation3 and Xbox 2 game developers actually use for physics is something else entirely, though. No matter how impressive physics can be, it usually takes the role of redheaded stepchild to graphics' goldenhaired firstborn in the pecking order for processor resources.

And it's a solution to this problem which, if not generating excitement, is certainly creating a level of frisson at GDC 2005. Operating in stealth mode since its founding in 2002, fabless semiconductor company Ageia has finally surfaced publicly with its first product, PhysX, something it dubs the world's first dedicated physics processing unit (PPU). Another heavy-duty piece of silicon, this chip consists of 125 million physics-focused transistors supported by 128Mb of RAM.

"In our current Unreal demo, we can roll 600 boulders down the hill. With Ageia's chip that could be thousands; that's not to mention the opportunity to handle more complex things"

"We've studied closely the nature of physics processing," explains Ageia's CEO **Manju Hegde**, who, like the other four company founders, has a long history in chip design. For that reason, Ageia has been on a steep learning curve in terms of understanding physics. But it has built a team of experts quickly, buying the Swiss-based company Novodex and hiring ex-MathEngine staff as well as hoovering up freelance talent.

"There are some aspects such as rigid bodies which are very well understood. Then you have more complex conditions such as fluid dynamics, soft body dynamics and finite element analysis," Hegde continues. "What we've done is looked at all the major algorithms used in physics simulations and have hardcoded the things that take time, such as Euler and Lagrangian fluids [see 'Physics: a primer' for more details], into PhysX. Of course, there's a certain amount of programmability too, but the way you get a cost-effective chip is by hardcoding. We don't want to be like a Cell or a



Thirteen cars meet thirteen multi-boned characters in this Ageia demo. The main use of the company's PhysX chip, however, will be the handling of thousands of elements, whether rigid bodies or particles, and their interactions

Pentium. As general-purpose processors, their goal is to handle every application. Our goal is to handle specific applications, speed the hell out of them and change the nature of realism in games."

And in terms of his quoted performance figures PhysX seems to offers a shift of magnitude. "The limit of physically modelled bodies for current games is anything from 30 to 100. With PhysX, we can do over 30,000," Hegde enthuses. "That's a tremendous difference, both in terms of quantity but also the type of physics you can expect."

Tremendous difference or not, the real issue is whether gamers will pay for the privilege of this new level of physics. Ageia's investors, who have stumped up $38 million already with the promise of $30 million more, clearly believe so. Another believer is Epic's vice president **Mark Rein**. The company has committed to supporting PhysX both in terms of future games and with respect to the Unreal Engine 3, which uses Novodex's physics solution. "Compared to graphics, people say you don't see the difference with physics, but I think physics is a 'see' difference," Rein says. "In our current Unreal demo, we can roll 600 boulders down the hill. With Ageia's chip that could be thousands, and that's not to mention the opportunity to handle more complex things like fluids."

A further supporting comparison stressed, both by Rein and Hegde, is with the slow transition of 3D graphics from software to accelerated 3D add-in cards. "I think it takes four to five years from when consumers and game developers are aware of a feature until it becomes a technology," reckons Hegde. "In the early 1990s, graphics were on the CPU, but it wasn't until the mid 1990s that you had graphics chips such as Voodoo 1 being released. Then all developers had to do hardware-accelerated graphics." The inference is that 2005 is marked for the first physics cards.

In one respect, at least, Ageia does have an advantage. As a fabless silicon company, much in the model of Nvidia, it just sells chips. How these will end up in PCs will be a matter for the wider industry – motherboard manufacturers, system integrators and OEMs as well as the traditional add-in board suppliers. Ageia's hope will be that it creates enough of an impact during its Christmas 2005 launch with discreet add-in boards that motherboards and OEM partners, who have to deal with longer production schedules, will also decide to support the new hardware. By 2006/7, so the plan goes, most PCs over, say, $1,000 will ship with a PhysX chip somewhere inside.

"I think Ageia is good for the entire PC industry," Hegde says. "PhysX is a bridging technology for the CPU and GPU. If anything, using it puts more stress on the GPU because we enable more complex rendering, and the same with CPU." In such a way, it's hoped PhysX may even help the adoption of high-end components; even if only in the niche gamer PC market produced by vendors such as Alienware and Voodoo. Its launch will be crucial, though. Support from between five and 15 titles from the likes of Ubisoft and Sega is promised, with pricing for the physics cards expected to range from $100 to $400 (£53-£213).

The problem, at least for the developers of these early games, is they can't assume players will have the PhysX chip. This means they can't take full use of its power for gameplay. Instead they are limited to using it for what's called cosmetic physics: cloth, fluid or hair simulations that don't affect how a game plays. And in a sense, although Hegde claims the second generation games will see the introduction of advanced gameplay, what's more likely is even in the longer term the PhysX

Physics: a primer

Rigid-body dynamics: The simplest form of physical interaction, rigid-body solutions assume that there is no change in the geometry of the interacting bodies. While this is clearly the case for two billiard balls colliding, it wouldn't be the case with a billiard ball colliding with a beach ball. More problematic for games, however, are examples of cars colliding, where relatively rigid bodies can experience significant deformations.

Finite element analysis: Used mainly in engineering situations, the finite element method models an object as a mass of idealised and similar elements – typically rigid bodies. The effect of any forces on the complete object can then be calculated by solving simultaneous equations over all the elements. The accuracy of the final answer, as well as the time required to calculate it, is highly dependent on the number of elements used. For this reason, it has seldom been used in games.

Soft-body dynamics: In contrast to rigid-body dynamics, soft-body dynamics is the simulation of bodies that can deform during interaction. This makes the calculations involved much more difficult to solve, particularly in cases where you have to deal with the collision of a soft body with itself. In terms of game dynamics, soft-body objects are typically items such as cloth, ropes and hair, as well as subsurface animation elements like muscles. With the introduction of new hardware, it is hoped soft-body dynamics will be able to be solved in realtime by approximating soft objects using thousands of rigid bodies.

Fluid dynamics: The most extreme problems in physical simulation are fluid dynamics. Although they are well described in mathematical terms, they are not only extremely computationally complex but also prone to rapid changes in conditions. One of the best-known fluid equations is Euler's equation, which governs the motion of a compressible fluid with with zero viscosity. Langrangian mechanics, on the other hand, are a general approach to motion which says bodies move along a path which minimises their difference between kinetic and potential energy. A combination of the two is known as the Euler-Langrange equations. With next-gen hardware, it should be possible to model fluids using tens of thousands of particles.







Taken from the latest demo of Havok Physics v3.1, this sequence shows the classic rigid-body behaviour – incorporating debris physics, continuous collision detection and breakable buildings – as a high-rise tower gradually crumbles to the ground

chip will be used to create more spectacular game effects. When showing off a realtime fluid dynamic demo – a liquid flow consisting of 1,000 particles cascading around a stairwell – Hegde jokes: "The first time we showed this to Mark Rein, he asked: 'Can you do blood?'" The subsequent demo is a gushing 2,000-particle flow of red liquid from a deer. "You can change the viscosity and see how it coagulates," Hegde explains.

Which isn't to demean Ageia. It's a technology company with a fresh product that's looking for as many friends and applications as it can. It does underline a wider point about physics, however: while it can be an important component of a great game, on its own it doesn't make a great game. Or, as Havok's Collins puts it: "There are cool games you can make just using physics but, in an increasingly massmarket-focused



industry, if people notice the physics it probably means it's not doing its job properly." But there is still hope that next-generation physics, whether courtesy of next-gen consoles or PhysX, will significantly influence the future of gaming.

"I think this divide between gameplay and cosmetic physics will be a trend for next-generation physics generally," argues Meqon's Lysén. "Gameplay physics is settling down and becoming standardised. Although there will be improvements, developers know what to expect from a physics engine, and they're not always interested in getting the most out of it. They just want to make it work. But on the cosmetic side, things are less well understood. It's exciting. It's a new kind of use for physics."

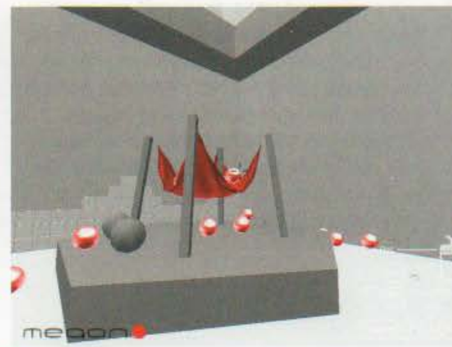
One example he uses is a ballroom filled with hundreds of chairs and tables. "You shouldn't have to explicitly state each chair can be broken and fall into this many pieces," he says. "It should be really easy to define a chair and put a hundred of them out there because you're not using any processor resource for calculating the physics until you start to move or break them." In this way, the physical properties of an object, its mass, breakability, friction, etc, will become a fundamental element of the game world.

"This is where physics starts to get interesting," Lysén says. "Everything in the game will be physical. Not for any specific gameplay purpose, but just as a natural part of making a realistic game. It will be the same as choosing a realistic texture. Each object will have material properties as well. It won't be direct gameplay physics but as a result I think we'll see more immersive games."

"Everything in the game will be physical. Not for any specific gameplay purpose, but just as a part of making a realistic game. It will be the same as choosing a realistic texture"

So will 2005 be the year of physics? Of course, just as every year has been since 1999. Only this time it will be just that little bit more, at least until 2006.





Mixing the rigid-body dynamics of balls and breakable materials with flexible constraints, this Meqon demo is the sort of chinashop scenario beloved of physics middleware companies. One example of cosmetic physics is cloth constrained by breakable joints (right)

Physics middleware: the line-up

HAVOK PHYSICS



COMPANY: Havok
PLATFORMS: GC, PC, PS2, Xbox, next gen
CLIENTS INCLUDE: Valve, Bungie, EA
URL: www.havok.com

Spun out of research from Dublin University, Havok's rigid-body physics solution has become the standard by which the others are judged – not least in terms of the games it powers, which include *Half-Life 2, Halo 2, Full Spectrum Warrior* and *Medal Of Honor: Pacific Assault*. Its most recent focus has been Havok Animation, a product which uses physics-based simulation for believable in-game character motion.

RENDERWARE PHYSICS



COMPANY: Criterion
PLATFORMS: GC, PC, PS2, Xbox, next gen
CLIENTS INCLUDE: Namco, Lionhead
URL: www.renderware.com

Available as a standalone component as well as part of the RenderWare Platform suite, RenderWare Physics is based on MathEngine's Karma physics solution, the rights to which Criterion acquired in 2003. It includes a set of genre-specific modules and also plays a key part in the integrated approach to game prototyping and creation provided by RenderWare and its dev framework RenderWare Studio.

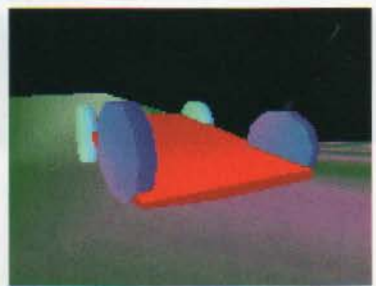
OPEN DYNAMICS ENGINE



COMPANY: ODE Project
PLATFORMS: PC
CLIENTS INCLUDE: Terminal Reality, Orion
URL: ode.org

A widely used open source library and C/C++ API for simulating rigid body dynamics in games, simulations and 3D tools such as Softimage's XSI package, ODE is mainly the work of ex-MathEngine coder Russell Smith. It's focused on the simulation of advanced joint types and integrated collision detection with friction, which makes it ideal for driving and vehicle dynamics.

FASTCAR



COMPANY: Oxford Dynamics
PLATFORMS: GC, PC, PS2, Xbox
CLIENTS INCLUDE: not available
URL: www.oxforddynamics.co.uk

As its name suggests, FastCar is optimised for vehicle and multi-body dynamics. It works by modelling the different elements of a vehicle such as gearbox, engine and suspension and applying a set of collision detection solutions, and claims to be able to simulate up to 100 cars on a PS2 and more on a PC. This approach can also be extended to model joints such as hinges and ball-and-socket joints.

NOVODEX



COMPANY: Ageia
PLATFORMS: GC, PC, PS2, Xbox, next gen
CLIENTS INCLUDE: Epic, Ubisoft, Cryptic
URL: www.ageia.com/novodex.html

Based in Zurich, Switzerland, and a start-up out of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Novodex quickly made its mark thanks to a combination of its multithreaded physics SDK and its Rocket design and prototype framework. Indeed, this was one of the reasons the company was bought out by Ageia in 2003. Its engine and tools are now used to support development of content for the PhysX chip.

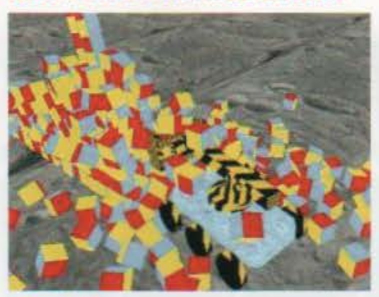
MEQON



COMPANY: Meqon Research
PLATFORMS: GC, PC, PS2, Xbox, next gen
CLIENTS INCLUDE: 3D Realms, Black Element
URL: www.meqon.com

One of the newer physics companies on the scene, Meqon is another example of a university-based startup, in this case Linköpings University in Sweden. Its big break came with the news it would be used for 3D Realms' *Duke Nukem Forever*, although it has over 20 other developers signed up as well. Its future products have also been recently licensed for use in Xbox 2 development.

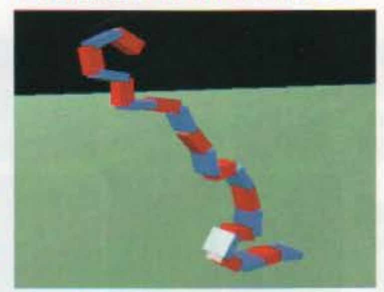
NEWTON DYNAMICS ENGINE



COMPANY: Newton Dynamics
PLATFORMS: Mac, PC
CLIENTS INCLUDE: not available
URL: www.physicsengine.com

A realtime solution for a wide range of physics simulation, the Newton Dynamics Engine uses a deterministic approach to handle collision detection and dynamic behaviour. There are three different solver mode configurations plus two different friction modes. Support is provided for vehicles, ragdolls, both standard and user-defined joints, friction and buoyancy.

TOKAMAK GAME PHYSICS



COMPANY: Tokamak
PLATFORMS: PC
CLIENTS INCLUDE: not available
URL: www.tokamakphysics.com

Another free physics engine is provided by Tokamak. Using an iterative approach to solving constraints, it is designed to provide a trade-off between the accuracy of the calculation and its speed and also limits the memory bandwidth required. Created specifically for game development, the SDK is a high level programming interface that supports joints, friction, collision detection, stacking and lightweight rigid particles.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

How can something so wrong...
...feel so right? And score so high?



Lego Star Wars is a game which gets some things right that other games haven't bothered to think about at all. Should it be penalised for breaking what those games might consider cardinal rules of good game design?

Two of the games reviewed this month have serious design flaws. One gets an eight, the other seven. Punishingly low marks, we grant you, by the standards of... well, certain arbiters, but high by any sane benchmark. How can that be right?

Meteos is a punishingly challenging puzzler, calling for quick hands, quicker eyes and the fastest of brains. Yet it can be beaten, for the most part, by scrubbing blindly at the screen. On a lucky day, you could finish the game with your eyes closed. On an unlucky day you could lose every multiplayer match to a stubbornly underhand opponent.

Lego Star Wars is a charming, welcoming delight – a flexible, generous game that has a lot to teach an industry bound by a strange and inflexible rulebook. Yet it has difficulty spikes and awkward levels that would make the game unplayable if it didn't short-circuit the problem by giving you infinite lives.

These design faults – one a quick fix, the other an unfixed flaw (no matter how much designer Masahiro Sakurai claims it's a deliberate 'feature') – are unquestionably clumsy. So why isn't it reflected in their review scores?

On playing these games it's instantly clear that they have more to offer than any shortcomings of their design documents indicate. Fixing either of these issues would have taken away something from each of these games. To remove the flexibility, speed and immediacy of *Meteos'* stylus control might have insulated it against cheap tactics, but it would have been at the price of neutering an otherwise inventive and engrossing game. To smooth the structure and tighten the infinite-life system of *Lego Star Wars* might have made it a more conventional challenge, but it would have robbed it of the exuberant, chaotic confidence with which it imbues its players.

Game design isn't a one-to-one equation. There are many titles – some reviewed this month – which do more right, but accomplish less in the process. And, of course, there are games which do more right *and* accomplish more in the process, and those are the ones to savour. But in between are these rare pleasures – games which reap the benefit of letting their bravado and ingenuity take the reins while cautious diligence snoozes in the backseat.

Now playing...

Kurushi



Forget *Resident Evil*, this is real survival horror. No enemy has ever been as relentlessly, viciously implacable as those blocks as they thump and crush their way forward.
PLAYSTATION, SCEI

World Of WarCraft



It gets to the point where you make a vow – a proclamation, no less: '/guild This is getting ridiculous. Who wants to come over and actually socialise?'
PC, VIVENDI

Phantasy Star Online Episode I&II

And what do you do when you finally get together in real life? Try to recreate the *WOW* vibe with splitscreen *PSO*, and ruin two happy memories in the process.
XBOX, SEGA

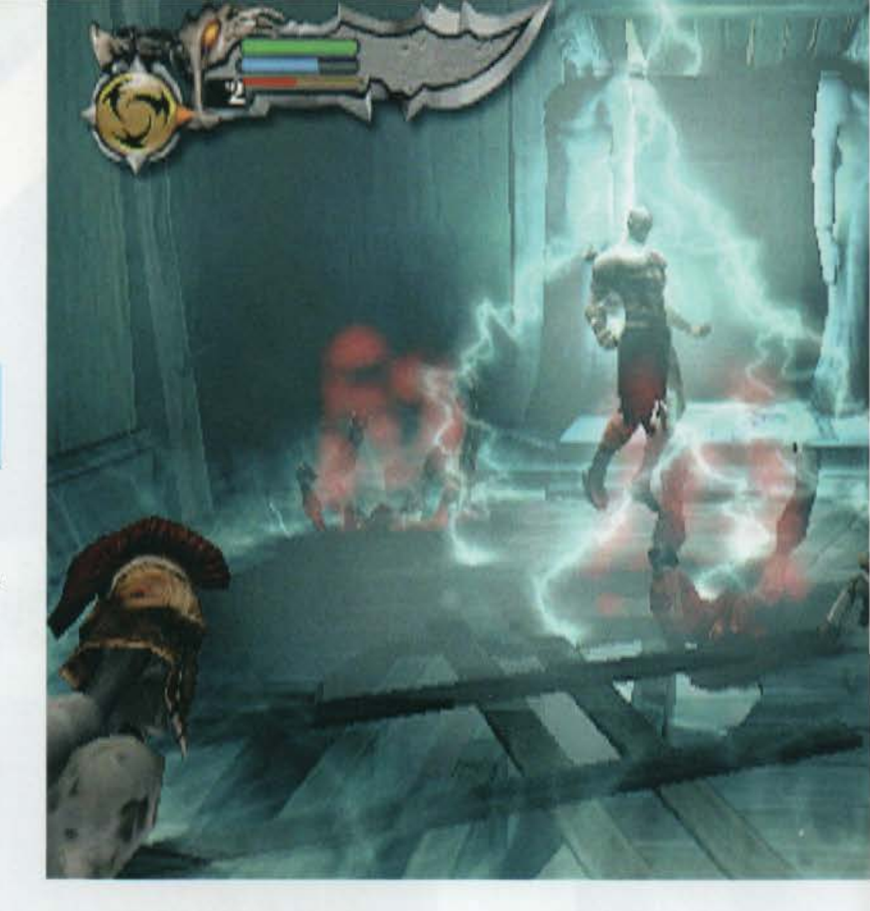








Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten





GOD OF WAR

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£27)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JUNE (UK) PUBLISHER: SCEA
DEVELOPER: SONY SANTA MONICA PREVIOUSLY IN: E148



Kratos is granted four magical attacks as he progresses, with Zeus' own thunderbolts provided to neutralise the sniping of distant archers. The lock-on is intelligent and swift, giving priority targeting to those who Kratos most needs to dispatch from afar

With *Devil May Cry 3* achieving just the right balance between maturity and immaturity, and *Resident Evil 4* establishing its own accomplished genre of revival horror, action games have entered a golden age. It's a time of harmony and fruition – of deluxe looks and vividly kinetic combat – and one that seems to have settled so utterly peacefully into the groove of outrageous violence. And, within that, *God Of War* – despite arguably not being the best in its class of recent standouts – is definitely its alpha male: loud, brash, cool. The prodigal son of a bitch.

It's hard not to feel that *God Of War* is the game that *POP: Warrior Within* was aiming to be, but with less Godsmack and more gobsmack – an unashamedly murderous spree of furious violence and unremitting, titanic spectacle. A true videogame epic, it's unfailingly sure-footed in its realisation of explosive drama, if not quite in terms of actual play. Such hyperbole is justified by the experience of *God Of War*, a game born for hyperbole, and one that's engaging through sheer impressiveness rather than anything innovative.

While the combat does have its refinements, in the form of responsive dodges, blocks and parries, *God Of War* doesn't match *Devil May Cry 3*'s twitchy brilliance or *Ninja Gaiden*'s sense of tight control. The bang per button press, however, is nigh unmatched, and what it lacks in subtlety it makes up for with gratuitous battery and bloodshed. It's about thunderous brutality and unabashed assassination, a sensation that's reinforced by the availability of fatality moves when enemies are approaching defeat. These often require the player to stab certain buttons, swivel the analogue stick and follow other onscreen prompts to drive the kill home. These fatalities can be awkward to pick out, however, when they're needed the most – during the midst of a chaotic, swarming battle – and it's in these situations that the combat can lose its precision. Slightly frustrating for those in it for the skilful execution it may be, but button-bashing is a valid strategy, making the game feel more like a headlong rush of might and power, especially for those just wanting to experience its remarkable sights.

Indeed, this accessibility is an appealing strength; while *God Of War* requires some thought and dexterity, it never matches the extreme demands of the aforementioned action titles, choosing instead to offer incredible amounts of thunder and fury for minimal investment, pulping corpse after corpse with even the most basic swings of Kratos' beautiful chain-swords. Even if, at times, the combat begins to feel like a churn, it nonetheless reliably produces some amazing butter – supremely smooth and thick with the taste of luxury.

As a consequence, of course, this can cause fights to feel somewhat flat, and suffer from a sense of creeping dullness, shifting it from breathless to out of breath. It's a guilty criticism, however, considering how everything is smeared so heavily in such an energetic, relentless spectacle: a skirmish across a rain-lashed boat culminating in the



The opening boss scrap is an enjoyably grand encounter, and the QTE button prompts are an excellent antidote to the tedious, looping exchanges of typical boss fights, allowing the battle to end in ferocious and novel execution. It's rare to say this about a game, but it's a shame there's not more of them











Kratos' dirty raspberry-ripple skin hides a gruesome secret, but he remains one of the weaker character designs in the game, compared to the shark-mouthed sirens or Kronos, the long-faced titan who shakes the desert by wandering it on all fours









Kratos often has to tiptoe his way through a series of beam balances. These sections are more about introducing vertigo than applying skill; the fixed camera angles can make high-wire negotiation seem tricky, but it never becomes problematic





Conquering the game unearths a treasure chest of bonus bits: God difficulty, a challenge mode, and deleted features and commentaries. They may sound generic, but they're more insightful and informative than the average 'making of' feature

fantastically gruesome slaughter of a towering hydra; cutting a swathe through an ancient, war-torn Athens as raging gods tear down its very foundations; tracking a titan with an enormous temple strapped to its back as it crawls around the desert. These are just some of the sets from the game's opening few hours and, regardless of how monotonous the combat can seem, the backdrops are rarely anything less than magnificent.

The second half of the game, however, sees it elevated above just glorified sightseeing, and develops an even more stunning sense of location. Focused on just a single temple, it blends together puzzles and battles in a far smoother and more palatable manner than the opening sections. Not to mention Kratos' acquisition of a hefty new weapon that brings new heights of mutilation, and a breathtaking conclusion of fantastically puffed-up aggression and grandeur. The final stretch of the game is astonishing, marred only by a short but infuriating wall-climbing section whose inclusion leaves you simply bewildered.

Indeed, it's not combat fatigue that's *God Of War*'s true weakness. Its Achilles heel is, like so many before it, the block-sliding puzzles. They're not abundant, but just about every time they appear they feel like an intrusive lull, even if a number of them do require some reflection. Also, while the game does try to add in a number of quirky diversions – such as grappling with enemies while climbing cliff faces, shimmying across lengths of rope or sudden-death trap avoidance – these feel hollow when compared to the carnage of the game's standout set-piece confrontations.

Still, few others have such an eager eye for explosive action, nor do they make such a splendid setting for it. With loading times limited to short, occasional pauses and some sensible, invisible checkpoints in place, it's a game that's held together as much by its technical muscle – as well as some striking design and cut-scenes to which the soundtrack is a phenomenal and suitably overblown accompaniment – as by the deadly, manageable grace of its combat.

From the near-pornographic money-shot that occurs during the slo-mo moments of certain vicious attack combos, to the ludicrous events that send the player travelling down a monster's throat, *God Of War* is made from the stuff of legend, to become the stuff of legend. While it's far from being a supreme ruler of the action landscape, it succeeds in one truly godly task: that of making itself worthy of devotion from so many mortals. **[8]**

God Of War is a game that's held together as much by its technical muscle as by the deadly, manageable grace of its combat

QTE-pie



While *God Of War* is mostly unabashed about sexuality – few of the women appearing throughout the game, human or inhuman, have their chests covered – it's a little coy about sex. As an aside to its deluge of violence, there's a little fornication for Kratos to indulge in as he services a pair of ladies who lounge in the bed aboard his ship. The camera shifts coyly on to a bedside table as the QTE minigame ensues, tracking a rocking vase as it teeters ever nearer the edge, wobbling in synch with Kratos' less hate-filled achievements. And the reward for 'success'? A handful of orbs, naturally.



Treasure chests are opened with the R2 button. While this gives Kratos a chance to strain his way through an animation, it's unnecessary, considering how awkward it is to access a health refill during battles



WIPEOUT PURE

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£21) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SONY LIVERPOOL)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E149



The Classic tracks are recreated in a vividly abstract simulation mode. It's a bold step to give the game three distinct looks – one each for normal, classic and Zone mode – but one which works well, especially when complimented by alternate skins (right)



A driving game's DNA is its racing line. Trace your optimum path, overlay it on a map of the track and you have a unique signature, a thumbprint which tells you more about how the game feels than a hundred screenshots. *Outrun*'s is angular – straight skids arrowing into each other as you slalom the curves. *Moto GP*'s is sinuous, snaking through the corners to nick all the sweet spots: entry, apex, exit. *PGR2*'s – on cone mode, at least – looks like a diagram from a leaflet condemning drunken driving. *Wipeout Pure*'s is just plain weird.

That's not a criticism. A defining factor of the series has always been its distinctive handling. The sharp heaviness of airbrake turns and the need to commit to corners oddly early has always been part of what allowed *Wipeout* to convey the feel that you were racing on air – connecting you to your ship without connecting you to the track. It's a sensation which *Pure* delivers in almost all respects. The sense of control is absolute, and the elation of boosting across clear air and anticipating the exit of a corner before you've even entered it is enormously satisfying. What has been lost a little is the sense of pitch – the tiny adjustments to nose height which allowed you to whittle tenths off your lap times in the original – but this is probably for the best. The analogue nub, which performs consistently well, might have struggled with the delicacy of input it would have required.

Your racing line is altered again by swerves for speed boosts and weapon pickups. Boosts are crucial as inclines and sharp turns sap your impetus at an alarming rate, and acceleration – particularly when there's someone right on your tail – is never (and could never be) as fast as you might want. And altered again by a new Side-shift move that, when performed with a double-tap on the appropriate airbrake, shunts you neatly sideways without any loss of speed. While initially unintuitive, it quickly becomes an instinctive part of your tactics, particularly useful for dodging mines and lining up awkward boosts. Mid-air barrel rolls – pulled off with a quick waggle of the stick – also add to your repertoire and reward you with an extra boost on landing.

This racing line, with its deep turns and odd detours, is superimposed over eight main tracks, of which a good number are initially underwhelming. On your first few blasts through the tournaments, you may remember little more than the Citta Nuova's vertiginous hairpin, the soaring jump in Chenguo Project and the slippery chicanes in Sebenco Climb. Work your way through the speed classes, however, and each comes into its own. From the pedestrian pace of Vector to the intimidating velocity of Phantom, each of the five speeds reveals something new in each of the tracks. Corners which seemed



The main tracks are full of tiny details, with animated hoardings and birds flocking (and cawing) overhead. The result is both strikingly beautiful and unusually lively



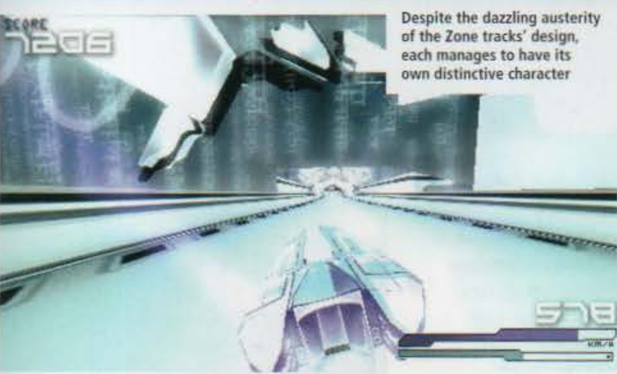
The shield is an essential power-up, as weapons carry enough physical force to blast you off the track – but it cuts both ways, clearing your competitors off the track





It's when *Pure* is at its most magnificent – five ships abreast heading into the gloom of a sun-haloed tunnel, missile smoke blooming against the sky – that the framerate suffers the most. It's almost worth it





Despite the dazzling austerity of the Zone tracks' design, each manages to have its own distinctive character



anodyne and cambers which appeared innocuous become major pitfalls when handled badly and something to be savoured when handled well.

Alongside the eight main tracks are four classic tracks, taken from previous *Wipeout* incarnations and presented as 'simulations' on the grounds that the real tracks have long since fallen into disuse. While it adds a startling new aesthetic to the game, these are less successful than the new tracks – partly because they were designed around subtly different handling models. The simulation look, while spectacular, is also a little off-putting, particularly for newcomers to the series who might have been glad of a few more landmarks to aid their memories. The remaining four new tracks are part of Zone mode, a legacy from *Fusion*. A simple – but not so simple – endurance test, *Pure* systematically ups your speed as you loop round a track. You last as long as your ship's shield lasts, and the hypnotic desperation it induces is perfectly matched by the dramatic starkness of the boldly abstract level design.

Part of Zone's pleasure is that it takes you away from the blast and crackle of combat. Although *Pure* dials down the emphasis on weaponry, it's still a game with fighting spirit. Battles – particularly off the first corner – are vicious and dramatic, the screen filling with smoke and sparks, your ears ringing with bomb blasts and sonar pings. Unfortunately, these are also the moments when the framerate drops, diminishing the spectacle and upsetting the flow at the moment when you want to be most on your toes. Damage to your ship is no longer repaired by pit lanes; instead you absorb any unwanted weapon pick-ups, each of which repairs a good chunk of your energy. It's unquestionably an improvement, not least because without it, having your ship destroyed would feel unfairly arbitrary. Many races will see you slip through the ranks relatively unscathed, and those where you are pummelled seem unpredictable and frustrating, as repeated impacts leave you at the back of the pack and unarmed as you gobble every weapon you pick up in order to limp to the finish.

Battles are vicious and dramatic, the screen filling with smoke and sparks, your ears ringing with bomb blasts and sonar pings

There's no question that *Wipeout Pure* is a very fine *Wipeout* game – and a very fine racing game. There are small frustrations about its practicality on a handheld machine – most notably the fact that the inability to save during a tournament leaves you reliant on the PSP's suspend mode. The lack of full online play is also a missed opportunity – particularly in light of *Pure*'s connectivity (see 'The skin trade') – although ad-hoc multiplayer is satisfying, stimulating and only a little bit frustrating to set up. But the nature of a *Wipeout* game means that – in a more even balance than almost any other game – it needs to look right, sound right and feel right. And, thanks to its beautiful, varied aesthetics, its lively, dynamic soundscape and its distinct, exhilarating handling, it deserves three out of three just as much as a score out of ten. **[8]**

The skin trade

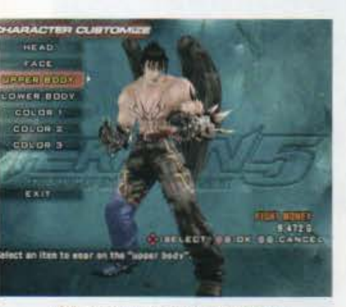


Part of *Pure*'s masterplan was to have new content – skins, ships and tracks – available for download. Although we were able to test the technology – very satisfactorily – at preview stage, the delivery system wasn't up and running for the retail version at the time of review. The irony is that, with a few simple setting changes, *Pure* has effectively become the PSP's first web browser, as the software it contains for letting you access these downloads can also be used to navigate – admittedly pretty slowly – most ordinary websites.



TEKKEN 5

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), SUMMER (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E139



If the costume choices available in character customisation mode share a common ground, it's that no sane person would dream of taking them into combat. Saxophones, unicycles and ornamental head-dresses feature

Tekken 5 is a volcanic restoration of balance to a series that, last time round, gave chase to personal demons while its fans stood choking on dust. It's a self-deprecating, overblown pantomime of blazing 'pows' and 'thwacks' – a switchboard of preposterously diverse narratives that somehow produces a well-rounded fighting engine from a cocktail of eccentric ingredients. In other words, the wilderness years have ended with an unusually satisfying return to familiar territory.

Namco has rolled back and resumed the King Of The Iron Fist Tournament, backstepping over the previous game and discarding its ambitions of heightened realism. Gone are the uneven floors, sweeping sidesteps and downplayed characters; reinstated are the explosive presentation, outlandish excess and the trademark abundance of content. The developer's command of these series essentials is such that a potentially ignominious retreat to the halcyon days is instead an affirmation – as technically proficient as any modern title and sufficiently evolved to justify itself.



The legacy of *Tekken*'s U-turn, however, is that two camps of fans must again become one. Those acclimatised to the last game's dramatic evasions and sidewalks will find themselves falling back upon the *Tekken Tag Tournament* defence of cancelled backdashes. The jabbing ethic has been similarly undermined as the improved tracking of sidesteps brings stringed attacks back to the fore. Teching (turning a fall into an evasion, for example) is still tactically sound, but wall techs have diminished in availability which, for the unwary, means a trip to the receiving end of pummelling, exploitative combos if they stumble into a corner. If there's a style of fighter that stands to benefit most from the game's system, it's the turtle – the perpetual evader, the opportunist. Crushing moves that cover high and low attacks mean that an advocate of the contrasting school – the pitbull – will pay a harsh toll for unchecked aggression. Charge in with reckless jabs and it takes but a simple crush by your opponent to have you at a frame disadvantage – the worst-case scenario of any fighting game.



Not as technically complex as *Virtua Fighter 4 Evo* and lacking the strategic wall placement of *Tekken 4*, the new environments remain both sumptuous and evocative



Namco has rolled back and resumed the King Of The Iron Fist Tournament, backstepping over the previous game and discarding heightened realism

With these initially muddling tweaks and revised rules, *T5* succeeds because it still provides space to improvise for those wanting to shake up their game. Your backdashes can be chained into sidesteps, blocks and throws can still be buffered into strings for an improved strategic range. It remains possible to chicken (reverse) an opponent's reversal and it's about as demanding a manoeuvre as it was in *TTT*, different characters requiring varied split-second inputs as opposed to the single command of *T3*.

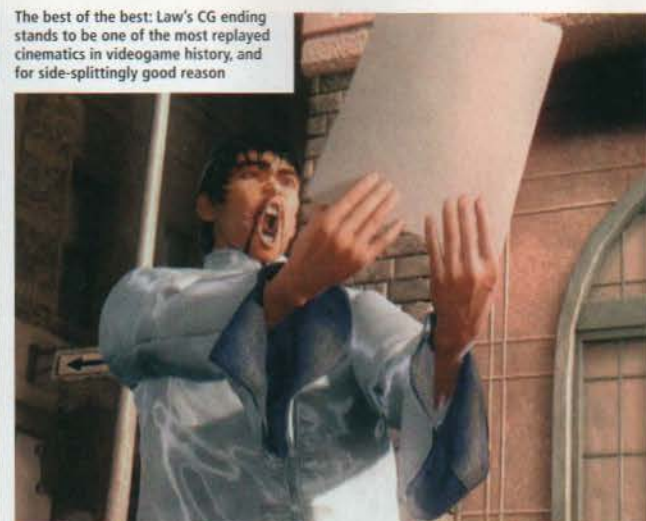
The characters themselves comprise a line-up that's thankfully more attuned to the game's eclectic styles than *T4*, with its subdued approach, could manage. King is snappier and Jin is toned down, while ten-hit combos continue their slide into redundancy – such changes in balance continue to keep you on your toes. The three new faces are a complement and none are quite as clumsily



The Arcade History mode offers no less than four complete revivals, each emulated to a tee. Rather than the opening three *Tekken* games, it's the on-rails space shooter *Starblade* that really stirs the cockles







The best of the best: Law's CG ending stands to be one of the most replayed cinematics in videogame history, and for side-splittingly good reason







Jinpachi – father of Heihachi and demonic boss of the game's story mode – is a genuine arcade player killer, heavily reliant on lethal fireballs and a troublesome stopping attack

ballistic as Steve Fox remains: Asuka Kazama inherits most of Jun Kazama's technique, Raven complements his bid to have Namco sued by Wesley Snipes with a rapid Bujinkan style while Feng Wei offers a mix of lightning-fast, powerful strikes that will satisfy jugglers no end. Predictably, the game quickly does a volte face on its 'Heihachi Mishima is dead' angle, his survival snapping the *Tekken* status quo back into place like a taught elastic band.

The restoration continues across multiple fronts, another being Namco's ability to compile a package of which people will justifiably talk. Every playable character in the game (including unlockables) rounds off the story mode with a unique CG ending. Artistically fantastic, they cover all of the series' creative bases from the apocalyptic domestics of the Mishima Zaibatsu to skits that push the series' bar of slapstick lunacy into orbit. The high standard of presentation continues in-game where both characters and stages bloom both technically and aesthetically. Feet and fists fly in graceful arcs and with splintering force, bodies corkscrew with sufficient impact and visual flair abounds: the explosion of concrete as the ground is struck, the mist of feathers as Devil Jin erupts in rage. It's reminiscent of the original PlayStation's twilight years, illuminated, as they were, with such stellar feats of last-minute development.

While it's a shame that the replay record function of *T4* is gone, the IC Card implementation of *T5* in the arcade has perfectly transmuted into the home version's customisation mode. So characterised are the adjustments that can be made to each character's appearance that their modest quantity never feels like an issue. A revised arcade mode now ranks the player via a succession of AI opponents, each masquerading as a real-life challenger with a suitably cringeworthy name. Unfortunately, there's little in the way of separately identifiable techniques to bolster the facade – the hierarchy of rankings having little bearing on the associated challenge.

Tekken 5 is a strictly mammals-only party, velociraptor Alex never having received his invite. This proves especially grating when you consider that Roger the kangaroo, his alternative form, has made the bill

Tekken is still a grand clutter of varied quality, too accessible for some and with supplements that don't always hit the intended spot. Somehow, though, its carefree generosity adds to the feeling that all is as it should be – a cathartic acknowledgement that, while a misplaced desire for innovation once pushed it off course, the series has found its way home. Though it many never learn consistency, it's remembered how to keep even the most jaded gamer beguiled. **[8]**

Satan spawn



Munificent as *Tekken 5* is, it's a shame to remind everyone that there typically has to be a dead rat at the bottom of the package. Devil Within is the latest upshot of Namco's curious desire to turn *Tekken* into a thirdperson action spectacular (as if *Death By Degrees* wasn't discouragement enough). Though it offers a more appropriate control method to Tekken Force and picks up slightly around the halfway mark, it never threatens to convince you that both player and developer haven't been subject to a grotesque waste of time. Players desperate to square off against Ogre in his various forms may last until (perish the thought) the end, but few others are likely to endure the maddening repetition for unlockables that, for the most part, can be obtained elsewhere.



HAUNTING GROUND

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: APRIL 29 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (PRODUCTION STUDIO 1)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E143, E148

Despite their exposed flesh and frail dispositions, survival horror heroines have traditionally kept a stiff upper lip when faced with dreadful scenes, as if they've seen it all as many times before as you have. But direct *Haunting Ground*'s Fiona Belli to examine a blood-slicked pillar and she starts in fright, heart rate quickening and vision blurring. It's an early indication that while the game's events may never truly scare you – it's magnificently bizarre, but not as harrowing as a *Silent Hill* – they will terrify Belli, switching the fatal liability from you being frozen with dread to her being driven into a blind, near-uncontrollable panic by it.

In fine Hammer Horror fashion, she'll spend most of the game running or screaming, plunging through a Chinese box of locations – escaping from one cage only to find herself in another, every thwarted pursuer replaced by one even keener to pick up on the hunt. This constant sense of dislocation produces an intentionally bewildering fugue of a ghost-train ride, as intricate settings are unfolded, then whisked away before you can plumb their secrets, with the side effect that your first playthrough may result in the most terse of the game's endings. But the journey nearly outshines the conclusion: puzzles are refreshingly straightforward, sparing the atmosphere from being interrupted by referral to scribbled notes and the player from being interrupted mid-solution by one of Belli's pursuers. Combat, or at least a fighting withdrawal to buy Belli time to hide, has evolved from the arbitrary hide-and-seek of *Clock Tower* into a desperate game of hopscotch, as you lure pursuers into dropped traps or expose their backs to a savaging from faithful hound Hewie.

The two's mutual survival, with neither girl nor dog able to withstand determined attack, is engrossing enough in its emotional connection to allow the mechanics to stay simple, despite the typically Capcom inclusion of a garden's worth of mystical herbs. Further supportive items can be brewed in laboratories (see 'Pick'n' alchemics'), but on the standard difficulty setting most serve little purpose other than to fill your inventory. For a game with few concessions to the formulas that birthed it – kickable, fire-hydrant-red item urns aside – the busy submenus are such a throwback that being unable to access them during panic attacks is more of a blessing than curse.

In a genre suffering from a confused balance of fight-or-flight signals, *Haunting Ground* is a distillation in the opposite direction of Capcom's other recent entry: the Blair Witch Project to *Resident Evil 4*'s splatter horror, a whole game spent in anticipation of something infinitely wicked coming that, if all goes well, never arrives. Some elements of story and gameplay are left disappointingly underdeveloped, and the grand environmental puzzles of the opening section become all but absent in the later locations – but when Belli's running for her life, you won't stop to notice. **[7]**

Pick'n'alchemics



Medallions collected during play can be sacrificed to create new items, but the delivery method is more occult slot machine than scientific apparatus. A series of colour-cycling slots must be stopped with a button press, with the amount of matching colours and filled slots determining the item produced. Depending on your reaction time skill, or button-mashing luck, this will produce anything from medicinal items to unique magical equipment.







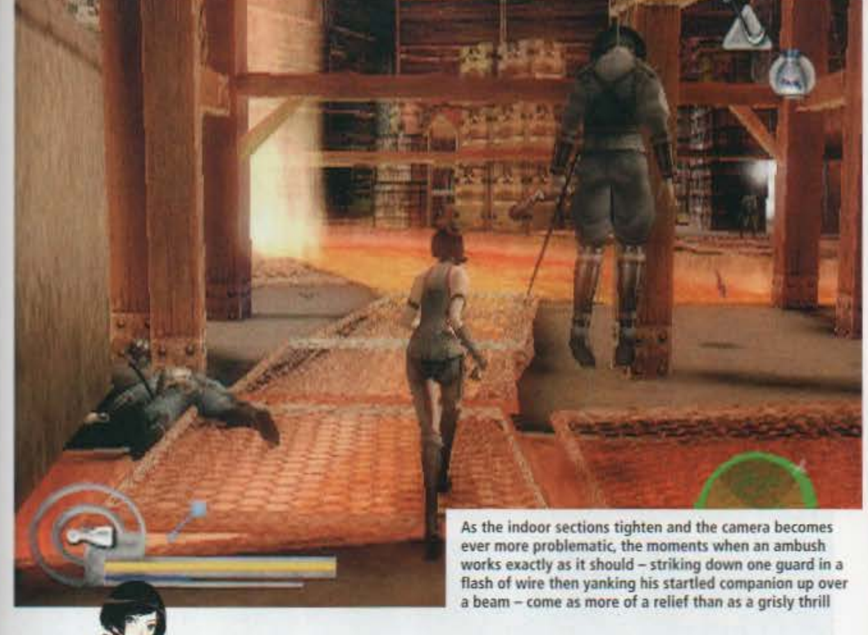
The morbidly askew settings play up the tension between chases as you search for the reassuring ticking of a save clock

An unlockable Hard mode offers new costumes and abilities for your foes, making for an interesting replay

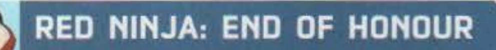


The game encourages regular restroom breaks, where a splash of cold water will alleviate panic





As the indoor sections tighten and the camera becomes ever more problematic, the moments when an ambush works exactly as it should – striking down one guard in a flash of wire then yanking his startled companion up over a beam – come as more of a relief than as a grisly thrill



RED NINJA: END OF HONOUR

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: VIVENDI
DEVELOPER: TRANJI PREVIOUSLY IN: E136, E140, E147

Red Ninja's tutorial is all rousing, wide-open promise: overgrown battlements stretched out under an immense blue sky, urging you to ignore the set of signposted lessons and instead sprint as far and fast as Kurenai can, bounding trenches, scaling sheer walls, until you reach the highest point, skid to a halt, and survey the world. It's like nothing you'd expect from a ninja game. So it's perhaps a misstep back down to earth that the opening level's path through hedged gardens and village streets is exactly what you'd expect from a ninja game.

But while you can inch along the walls performing close kills in customary style, it's truly a training ground for the game's signature ranged assassination: a press to loose the wire, a flick of the analogue stick to angle for the head, a tap at the moment of connection to pull both free. Coldly efficient and scorpion-sting fast, it spurs you on to take the game at speed, not at a crawl, but either suffer as you enter tight quarters.

For the camera, teetering on the brink of rehabilitation in previous code, has lapsed back into stuttering between fixed paths and thirdperson angles, battering itself against walls for (crucial) seconds at a time. Even making the compromise of running with one stick and steering with the camera can't stop it snagging on nearly every obstacle, as if Kurenai's athletics are being documented by an ungainly filmmaker incapable of keeping pace.

It's saved from being utterly game-destroying through artificial means – limitless continues for when the camera's attention is elsewhere during a wall-run out over infinity – and by design, in that discovery isn't necessarily a death sentence, even when outnumbered ten to one. As in *The Mark Of Kri*, stealth is a means to an end rather than a means to avoid one, and the limb-scything tangle of an open battle provides a frenetic alternative to the stealthy approach.

But if Tranji's design intentions can't be faulted, its design inexperience can, too often pushing tense challenge into arduous frustration. Jumping sections are exacting enough without collapsing platforms, boss encounters gruelling enough without random environmental hazards. Areas that offer a lattice of beams and rafters to spider across can be more taunting than inviting, such is the effort required to stay aloft and track foes undetected rather than take the softer option of a frontal assault.

And that's *Red Ninja*'s undoing – the amount of effort required on the player's part to make Kurenai's movement effortless. Even the most dedicated players are likely to fall out of love with the game more frequently than its promise of unstoppable motion and a world outside slate-grey corridors (which becomes more distant as the game progresses) can entice them back. Sadly, it's unlikely to trouble the genre either, and future ninjas will be left dreaming of those endless grassy plains. **[5]**



A platforming section in a tremor-struck temple is both a high and low point – completing it in one dash is an Olympian effort, but you're likely to have made an hour of trial runs first





The lengthy second level (left), where an unassuming saltpetre mine opens out into canyons, clifftop fortresses and a rainswept boss duel, is one of *Red Ninja*'s most significant achievements







If Kurenai's wire achieves razor-sharp tension from being stretched to its fullest, the same can't be said of the game design stretching across so many ideas, with the initial sure-footedness soon becoming unglued. The sorest loss is the ability to exploit environments other than in preset locations, hamstringing Kurenai

Fight foul



Beyond the normal conditions for a stealth kill it's possible to blind enemies with a well-placed blowgun dart and then saunter up for the killing blow, or drop a smoke bomb in a crowd and backstab your way out in the confusion. Even the hardiest of samurai will run from a sudden massacre, at which point they're defenseless against being reeled back in with a quick wire-throw.



LEGO STAR WARS

FORMAT: PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: APRIL 22 PUBLISHER: GIANT
DEVELOPER: TRAVELLER'S TALES PREVIOUSLY IN: E141, E148



There are 56 characters in total that can be unlocked and collected. Of them, Yoda is arguably the wildest, transforming from a doddering geriatric into a tornado of whirling attacks the moment his saber's drawn. And that's before you've even pressed the attack button

Dexter flesher



The comprehensively awful Dexter's Diner from Episode II is finally put to some good use here, forming the hub for *Lego Star Wars*. As well as being a dependable source of studs (the game's currency), it's rife with props that can be Forceably meddled with. It forms the garage that stores the kit pieces you collect throughout your adventure. Most endearing, however, is the fact that all the characters you unlock gather here, wandering about from room to room and getting into impromptu scraps with one another, adding immeasurably to the game's dinky charm.

As you may have guessed, *Lego Star Wars* is a game for kids. That's not meant as an insult, although the connotations that such a term has garnered in recent years is an insulting one. *Lego Star Wars* is not childish pap, and it's not an anodyne afterthought that's just a forgery of a proven genre, dressed up in a popular franchise. It is, however, a game that manages to understand the notoriously nebulous demands of Club 8-13, a demographic that, unlike adults, won't put up with dullness and clumsy, sickly design as a trade-off for eventual reward.

The team behind *Lego Star Wars* understands this, and have made the game shockingly simple and accessible without being throwaway. A second player can join or leave at any time, and actions are limited to uncomplicated double-jumps, Force powers and laser blasts. Even deflecting enemy firepower – a funky hallmark of light saber mastery – is implemented in a straightforward but nonetheless gratifying manner.

The developers also understand the fascination involved with the brand they're bringing to virtual life – the stubby charm of Lego's characters isn't lost in the slightest. In fact, the game's animations and realisations of certain key Star Wars figures and locations are more charismatic and affecting than anything the more po-faced *Star Wars* games have managed. The game's endlessly joyful cut-scenes – centred on key moments from Episodes I-III, which also form the game's stages – are condensed into short, hyperactive and deeply jolly plot summations.



The ability of your AI-controlled teammates to follow you intelligently and aid in the solving of puzzles is tremendous, especially compared to their relative laziness in combat. They're also prone to the occasional bout of lemming-style suicide, but the provision of infinite lives covers this

The *Lego* development team further understands that enjoyment and replay value aren't limited to increased difficulty, longer levels or an arms race of power-ups. The game provides an abundance of collectibles – so generously that there's rarely a need to traipse after every little knick-knack, and there's the well-implemented chance to return to any stage with any character, with an eye to uncovering its secrets.

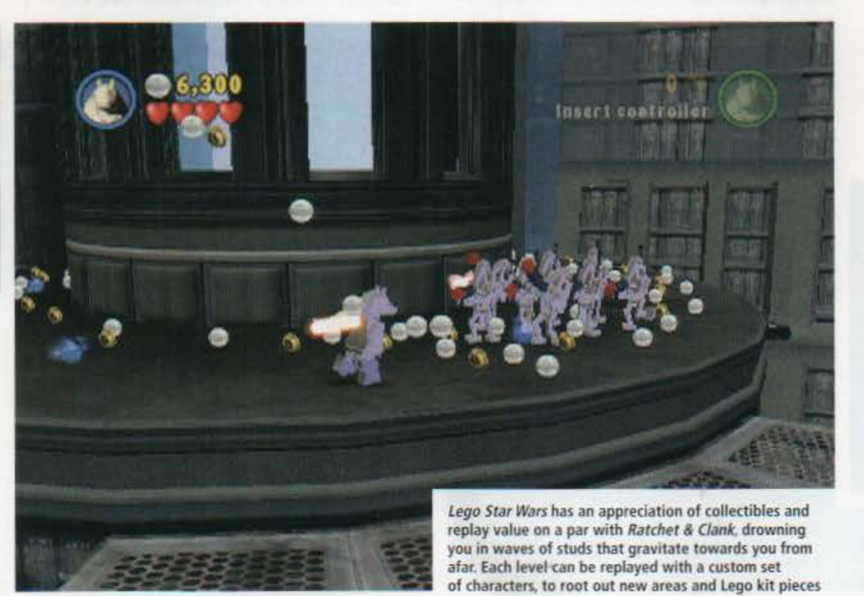
But *Lego Star Wars*' strongest feature is also one that covers up its biggest weakness. You have infinite lives, a double-edged piece of design that means there's never any pressure to do anything other than enjoy each stage. There are numerous sections in the game, however, that would have been virtually unplayable if not for this relative invincibility. And certain vehicular levels – especially those focused on shooting – feel messy and aimless.

By design, it's not meant to be a game to be savoured and obsessed over. It's for dipping into, and happily revisiting. With so many action games of recent times feeling so demanding and so preoccupied with reward for skill, and skill alone, it's all the better for it.

Kids are often underestimated, but that doesn't mean their games should be. *Lego Star Wars* has an appeal that goes beyond age, even if it's one that rarely goes beyond 20 minutes at a time. **[7]**



The fact that friendly characters can harm one another initially seems like a oversight, considering the cooperative nature of play. But that infinite stock of lives continues to work its magic, meaning that on-the-spot spats between friends are a valid diversion, and infighting won't ruin the game at all



***Lego Star Wars* has an appreciation of collectibles and replay value on a par with *Ratchet & Clank*, drowning you in waves of studs that gravitate towards you from afar. Each level can be replayed with a custom set of characters, to root out new areas and Lego kit pieces**



VGS displays g-forces, tyre stress and grip. While initially amusing, it never proves truly exploitable and remains an undesirable alternative to having the info communicated via more refined handling



ENTHUSIA PROFESSIONAL RACING

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£35) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), MAY 6 (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E146

While aiming high is to be praised, so is the ability to maintain a realistic perspective. And the reality is that the latest *Gran Turismo* is the result of almost ten years of continuous refinement and, despite its shortcomings, drags the standard for realism-influenced driving games substantially further along the quality track. Which essentially means any publisher launching itself into the genre – effectively doing so from a comparatively standing start – has an awful lot of road to make up.

Sat in the pits, proudly displaying its promising spec list, Konami's *Enthusia* certainly seems qualified for the task. All components of the modern driving game – career, single race, versus and driving school equivalents – are present but, whichever one you choose, the moment you get on to the track it's soon clear *Enthusia* can't possibly manage to travel the required distance. Its main failing, predictably, is the handling. Konami may proclaim it has successfully synthesised the most realistic driving model to date, but in practice it feels woolly, excessively prone to understeer and ultimately neither capable of conveying a real degree of communication nor a satisfactory sense of finesse. The much-hyped Visual Gravity System (a visual representation of g-forces acting on the vehicle – familiar to anyone following the current F1 season – tyre stress and traction levels) is a neat touch but it just highlights the inability of the handling to transmit this information instinctively and connect you to the car the way Polyphony's titles manage to.

On a brief positive note, the Enthusia Life career mode has its charm (see 'RPM, TCS, RPG') and consideration has obviously gone into its structure, but a racing game wins or loses by its on-track action and here there simply isn't much. Yes, there's a good sense of speed, but the dreariness of racing against brainless AI opponents who combine little awareness of their surroundings with a remarkably lethargic and lifeless approach to a supposedly exciting activity soon has that counterbalanced. Granted, Polyphony's games have never excelled in providing real racing thrills either (that's been more *TOCA* territory) but they have consistently delivered on the exhilaration of pushing car and driver to their limits while simultaneously satisfying the passion of car aficionados.

Naturally, for as long as every new *Gran Turismo* release continues to secure pole position in the global sales chart grids, there will be a pit lane full of contenders keen to chase it down and hoping to share the podium spot enjoyed by Sony's phenomenally popular and lucrative franchise. Doubtless Konami will try again, as will others. For now, though, *Enthusia* remains a distant speck in *GT4*'s rear-view mirror. **[5]**





Anyone considering importing should note that the game is text-heavy. Some trial and error is therefore required in order to successfully navigate the Japanese release







The racing school option tests your driving dexterity by imposing specific speed-limit requirements for each gate in addition to their physical placement on the track



Existing circuits are mixed with fictitious tracks in real locations. Their design may not be strong, but some of them manage to provide the odd memorable section

RPM, TCS, RPG



Borrowing its mechanic from the RPG, *Enthusia*'s career mode operates a level-up system for both driver skill and car tuning, based on 'skill points' acquired during races. Straying off the racing line, venturing offroad, hitting barriers and opponents deducts points, thus slowing your overall progress, while further penalties are suffered from the depletion of your HP bar, forcing you to rest and miss one of the weekly meetings unless you've accumulated sufficient 'ranking points' during the race (as well as ensuring that you behave properly on the track). The latter are based on your final position multiplied by the difficulty quotient for each event (which in the interest of balance is calculated on the basis of your car's performance).


Medicine cabinets, in conjunction with the white button, provide the health pick-ups necessary to keep you alive



Grenades can be potent, knocking out several insurgents at a time, but the throwing distance remains rigid, rendering them fairly useless in many encounters. The explosions and physics are generally weak, too



CLOSE COMBAT: FIRST TO FIGHT

FORMAT: MAC, PC, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: TAKE TWO DEVELOPER: DESTINEER

Anti-personality mine



The new trend for wargames developed with the military is supposed to add depth, but *First To Fight* shows how authenticity and entertainment are difficult to reconcile. Ally AI rigidly sticks to its routines – watching as your men die because they'd rather continue covering an allotted zone rather than deal with the bad guy can be excruciating.

Where *Full Spectrum Warrior* created believable men following orders, *First To Fight*'s troops – despite being modelled on real Marines – feel more like lazy programming.

Hardly a month goes by without a team-based tactical shooter hitting the market – a genre that has blossomed over the last few years. While Ubisoft has cultivated this material with meticulous efficiency and Pandemic has set the benchmark for authentic inch-by-inch urban warfare, together they've effectively frozen out the competition. But Take Two's effort isn't just a failure because it compares unfavourably with superior games.

First To Fight is set in a hackneyed near-future where east clashes with west in a crass ideological battle of Rocky IV proportions. It's a spurious setup bolstered by the fact that *First To Fight* was initially developed as a training tool for the US Navy. Yet the only apparent impact of this relationship is a seemingly endless litany of official-sounding abbreviations like RTFA, MAGTF and OPFOR. Play the game proper and it merely descends into a lackadaisical FPS with clunky buddy and enemy AI.

Send your team ahead to tackle dangerous situations and they display erratic behaviour. Enemies approaching at a distance are usually dealt with efficiently, but if a foe creeps up on your men so they're facing each other toe to toe it results in a Mexican standoff, with both parties waving their guns threateningly but failing to show any kind of killer instinct. Further frustrations emerge due to a design feature that sees your mission ending if more than two of your crew expire. At the best of times you'll find yourself nannying your team, at worst you'll just leave them behind.

Missions have also been designed with a stultifying lack of imagination. Each level is segmented and incident-based with a checkpoint directly after each encounter. Kill the enemies at the roadblock. Take out the APC. Reach the library. Clear the sewers of danger. *First To Fight* ends up feeling like it's been built by PC game developers obsessed with quicksaves. There's absolutely no creative latitude; it's a case of remembering where enemies appear and getting them before they get you.

Regardless of whatever training intention lies beneath the game's dynamic, the result is faintly farcical. It's hard to take seriously enemies who move away from cover at the sound of gunfire or stagger into the open if you shoot them in the leg. And if this litany of weaknesses weren't enough, *First To Fight* is visually rough and ragged. Some engaging multiplayer maps and online features save it from being a disaster, but this doesn't really deserve to share shelf space with titles that deliver military tactics with greater precision and venom. **[4]**





Progress is saved automatically when you cross an invisible checkpoint. Losing too many team members results in game over, so it can get annoying to find yourself in an unwinnable situation with a man dropping dead as soon as you reload the last save


The element of surprise is everything, and your team handles room clearances expertly, mainly because these are practically prescripted. Unfortunately, they handle on-the-fly battles with less success



Your troops' ferocious special skills are awesome in both their appearance and destructive effect. The game keeps its eye on balance, however, so tactics that involve recklessly charging forth and bludgeoning both friend and foe will cost you dearly once post-battle scores are tallied

KESSEN III

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), APRIL 29 (UK)
PUBLISHER: KOEI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

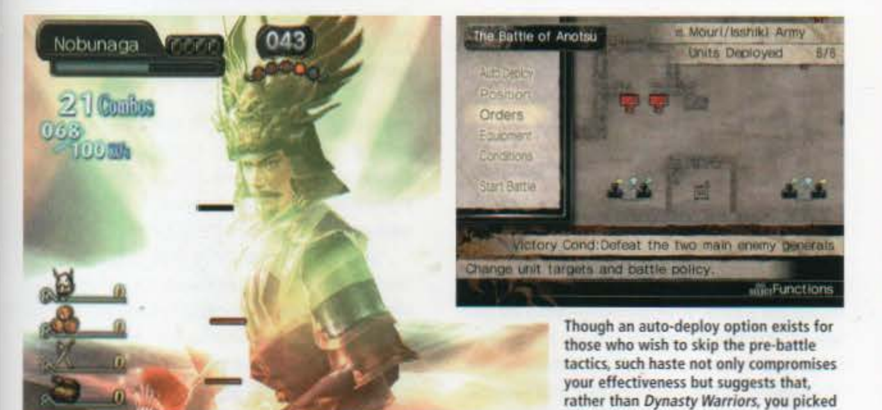
Koei's protracted love letter to Japanese military history continues to be written in two different inks. In the relentless *Warriors* series, the cast-iron hack'n'slash mechanic of its marathon battles has, to all but the staunchest fans, faded in vigour to the point of near invisibility. *Kessen*, on the other hand, is more flexible, contemplating its direction at length before charging forward.

Third time around, it's decided to become closer – closer to the thunder of hooves, the exchanges of muskets, arrows and blades and the clash of warring generals. Though this latest path brings it near enough to the *Warriors* franchises to scrape alongside it, the series maintains its personality of quantitative onscreen scale and requisite strategy. Its narrative roots remain entrenched in Japan's tumultuous history, returning to the Sengoku (warring states) period that informed *Kessen* rather than Romance Of The Three Kingdoms – the novel that inspired its successor. Again, it peppers its story with historically upheld legends, casting them in a largely fictitious saga of love, honour and betrayal strung between authentic military encounters.

The series faithful will find that adjusting from tabletop to fully realtime battles is neither immediate nor particularly easy. Players must now usher visually reduced clusters of troops around the battlefield, hammering out combinations of established skills and newer *Warriors*-style attacks against the opposition. Though AI governs units when necessary, the player can, and must, switch between their generals as the action develops, not only in the obvious case of having two battalions in distant locations, but also when fighting side by side with your occasionally unpredictable support.

It sounds like a marriage made in hell but it actually works. Controls are considerately mapped and easy to master, quickly bringing the entirety of the game's system within grasp. Essentially, face buttons attack and retreat, analogue sticks move troops and camera, while shoulder buttons coordinate. The game sensibly pauses during the selection of generals, specials and tactics, forcing the action aside while strategy intervenes. The various considerations required to shape and maintain your forces can still overwhelm, not least in the ongoing management of equipment or when you stumble into an ambush with multiple opponents backed by distant cannon and rifles. Fortunately, the backbone of strategy means that behind every chaotic disaster lies the digestible conclusion that, with better planning, it could have been avoided.

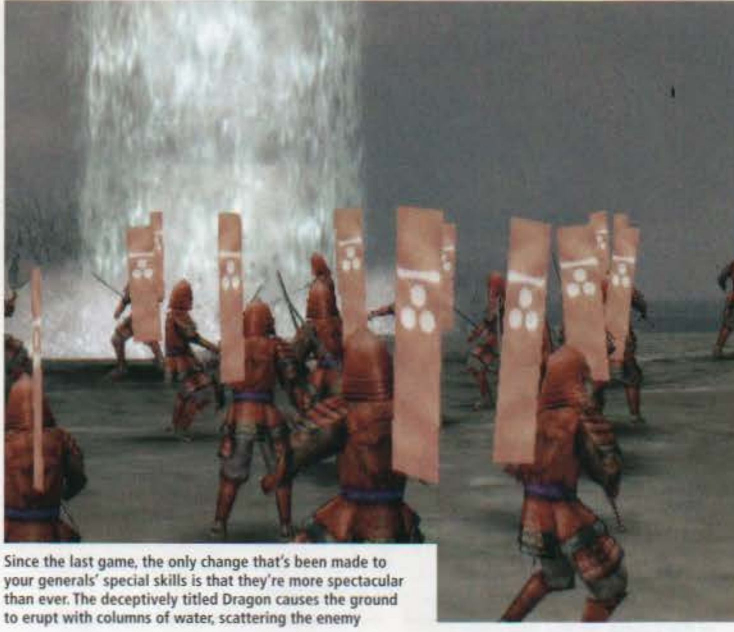
Skirmishes in *Kessen* have always been built from a limited range of gambits; while the attractive yet obstructive scenery of *III* serves to spice up individual encounters, it fails to entirely shake the sense of limited underlying variety. By now, however, you know that there'll be cinematics to keep you entertained. Rendered by a frequently stunning in-game engine, cut-scenes abound and stir up volumes of drama between those drawn together amid the flames of war. The voice acting's still somewhat eccentric, but this time seems to click more with the larger-than-life portrayals that keep you merrily watching, strategising, hacking and slashing through to the end. **[7]**



Though an auto-deploy option exists for those who wish to skip the pre-battle tactics, such haste not only compromises your effectiveness but suggests that, rather than *Dynasty Warriors*, you picked up the wrong game by mistake



While the quantity of troops visible onscreen has dropped from the 500 of *Kessen II*, the overall visual quality is significantly enhanced



Since the last game, the only change that's been made to your generals' special skills is that they're more spectacular than ever. The deceptively titled Dragon causes the ground to erupt with columns of water, scattering the enemy

General practice



Whichever configuration of skills your characters take into battle, the Rampage will always be at your disposal. More detached, developed and involving than similar moments in the previous game, this is an inevitable bleed through from *Dynasty Warriors*, such is the increasing proximity of the two series. Here, however, an appropriate level of strategy has been slid under the surface, ensuring a tactical relevance that validates the implementation. The upshot is that generals are a greater pleasure to control than before, sweeping through and around enemy troops with shift movements and charge attacks. Culminating in a face-off with your opposite number – the target of your Rampage attack – these melees throw up regular power-ups that variously affect both general and troops. Emerging victorious, meanwhile, will have the opposite effect on your opponents.



TRACKMANIA SUNRISE

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: DIGITAL JESTERS DEVELOPER: NADEO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E139, E147

Drive me crazy



Sunrise's second new play mode (besides Platform) is Crazy, an initially bewildering spin on time-trial racing that sees your vehicle splinter into 15 ghosts at the start of the course. As you end each lap, a phantom competitor is replaced with your own realtime replay, as you complete as many of the 16 laps as possible within the time limit. It means that 16 cars are always present on the track; with each successive lap causing more of them to hog your racing line, it's a cunning way of giving the player feedback on how to improve performance. Since so many of *Sunrise*'s courses require heavy replay, it's a slick and welcome embodiment of the time-shaving nature of the game.

The original *TrackMania* took racing games back to the future, a future that was promised by old-time classics like *Micro Machines* and *Stunt Car Racer* – games where cars were toys that could fly. *TrackMania* was where driving games were seemingly headed, before being aggressively overtaken by racing experiences fixated with Haynes Manual detail, real-world manufacturers and urban fascination; aspiration as much as acceleration. *Sunrise*, much like its reassuringly successful forebear, embodies an equally playful spirit, one that's unafraid of looking ridiculous for the sake of entertainment.

The serpentine bends of the original's tracks have been relaxed into something far less severe, for the sake of accommodating *Sunrise*'s new and terrifying sense of speed, and have been replaced somewhat by a remarkable sense of scale. Despite *Sunrise*'s increased visual detail – even down to the worryingly obligatory wet neon look that slicks the city tracks – the game retains its construction-set charm, providing race courses so dizzyingly outrageous that they could only come from the imagination of a maniacal Scalextric fan. Handling remains tight, too, and despite vehicles moving with far more weight and inertia it's a shift that's compensated for by the generous widths of the tracks themselves.

For a game that's so much about the joy of abandon, however, *Sunrise* feels perhaps a little too demanding for its own good. On normal difficulty, each of the four modes requires silver medals for each course to be cleared, with at least one gold needed to open the next tier. This condition seems harsh to begin with; each track has its own foibles and unforeseeable obstacles, meaning the game's speed and knockabout nature lends itself more to trial and error than precision driving. But, thankfully, *Sunrise* remains straightforward and playful enough to settle the player into a one-more-go groove, meaning that medal requirements are soon met.

Platform mode, one of two new aspects of this sequel, is a brilliant idea done moderate justice. It treats the player's vehicle like an acrobat, flinging it around daredevil loops and across colossal jumps at the speed of unsound. It has no time limit, but requires the player to complete each course with a limited number of track resets. However, mid-air car control feels inadequate, limited to just acceleration and braking, meaning there's an infuriating randomness involved with some of the dafter obstacles.

Still, it's an experience that offers as much freshness as frustration, and delivers sheer enjoyment with little concession to reality. *Sunrise* does nothing truly brilliant, but does it with such engagingly raw excess that it's hard not to be sucked in by its fairground attraction. **[7]**



Handling is responsive enough to allow the game to be played respectably using just the directional keys. An analogue pad, however, is the best option for winning gold medals (and then the gruelling developer medals)



Sunrise has some frantic and extreme courses. With breakneck speed, fantastic scale and nerve-racking leaps, it's a better template for a 3D Sonic game than *Sonic Adventure* managed to be




The camera switches at certain points in a bid to be helpful, but an onscreen guidance arrow would have been welcome. The standard view can be completely customised in terms of pan and zoom, though



Enemies are colourful, vicious, and interesting to fight against. Supervillains require coordination to take down, as players must neutralise their special abilities



FREEDOM FORCE VERSUS THE THIRD REICH

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: DIGITAL JESTERS DEVELOPER: IRRATIONAL GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E139, E145, E148

Can games be funny without resorting to witty lines? Can a designer crack a joke without resort to words or sentences? Can you imbue a game mechanic with humour? Games like *Monkey Island* and *Grim Fandango* have established benchmarks which everyone recognises, but it's rare for games to go further. Beyond words, it's far harder to find laughter in the way pixels and polygons collide. This new *Freedom Force* is a funny game. Funny lines, funny characters, funny stories, based on funny books. Fundamentally, though, it's funny to play. *Freedom Force*'s strange mix of clicking icons to select special powers, moving characters, pausing battles and thwocking evil makes you laugh.

Witness then this embedded hilarity. The Green Genie's major power is to turn devilish baddies into potted plants. Tank shells repeatedly miss their target, flopping into a block of flats in a crowded city. A French fencing champion becomes so enraged at Nazi malevolence, she begins her own independent slashing spree, taking out an entire regiment, including their monkey escorts. Sky King stands fast against a platoon full of gunners, their bullets ricocheting off his metal armour, back into their faces. This is you shaking the design, gleeful laughter falling out.

Freedom Force traded on humour and enthusiasm, and as a consequence, more was written about the style of the piece, its grainily inked cut-scenes and bombastic voiceover than about its core mechanic: short, pause-based superhero battling and scenery crushing, close to an RTS version of *Power Stone*. Lamposts are wrenched out of the ground, manhole covers plucked from the streets, cars and trucks hefted overhead and launched towards an oblivious aggressor. Enemies just keep on coming – charging from their choreographed entry points directly towards the nearest member of your team. There's no intelligence to their actions, nothing to exploit. They run into view. You hit them, and move on.

Yet the central mechanic obscures this apparent simplicity. Energy management is key to survival – each of the hero's powers requires a certain amount of energy blobs. This is continually recharging, up to a maximum of three units. In large fights, ensuring that your characters are always fighting fit is a complicated task that encourages, and sometimes demands, creative use of powers. One hero goes in and knocks a crowd off their feet. Another stuns a supervillain. While the hordes are down, the remaining pair concentrate their efforts on subduing any stragglers. By now, the first heroes to make contact are ready for their next assault. You're creating a supergroup tag-team. In your head, you can hear the quips and comic book dialogue.

That's what matters. Ignore the presentation, the much-talked-about comic book inspiration. Ignore the artwork, the ridiculous voiceovers and the magnificent origin stories. Pay it no attention. The really funny thing about *Freedom Force* is how little the funny stuff matters. **[7]**



The Green Genie's special attack throws everything around her into the air, including heroes, enemies and extraneous objects, letting them land in a heap. It's perfect for scattering groups of enemies in a tight situation





Landed blows and loosed powers are announced by perpetually amusing onomatopoeic flashes. Irrational obviously appreciates that nothing says "Biff!" like an outsized exclamation bubble shouting "BIFF!"

Creation story



The creative masterstroke of *Freedom Force* is the character creation tool, which allows you to build your own superhero. From a selection of meshes, you can create your own versions of special abilities, violent powers and token weaknesses. Best of all, player-created characters can then be imported into the singleplayer campaign to fight alongside Minute Man et al. Expect the user community to craft two types of hero – one for the raging multiplayer warfare, and a roleplay version with detailed origin stories and specific, themed abilities.



Bots are sprightly enough to be engaging in offline tournaments, but one-on-ones can feel dull. They make for reliable partners in Capture The Flag and other team encounters, but are not immune to the occasional glitch that leaves them frozen to the spot



Shooting can be performed in either first- or thirdperson, but unsheathing your melee weapon forces an out-of-body view. It's this aspect, more so than the tremendous agility, that's the weakest deviation from the deathmatch norm. Fatalities are also included, if only to rub a real-world opponent's face in defeat



UNREAL CHAMPIONSHIP 2: THE LIANDRI CONFLICT

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: APRIL 15
PUBLISHER: MIDWAY DEVELOPER: EPIC GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E147

Coming to *Unreal Championship 2* after the crisp, subtle combat of *Halo 2* is something of a culture shock. The measured pacing and coolly controlled battles are replaced with a nauseating nightclub of gaudy future-industrial arenas, messy flak blasts, cheesy smacktalk, perspective switches and noisy melee moves. And speed, so much speed – it feels almost like a driving game next to *Halo*'s weighty plod.

It's a shift that, to begin with, seems overly complicated – as the player is literally assaulted with combo possibilities, darting wall-jumps and a six-pronged menu of character-specific adrenaline powers. So rarely has a deathmatch shooter made the player feel so green – initial kills are intensive work, and far from being one-hit wonders.

But, despite these heavy demands, the game's complexity slowly gives way to a sensation of depth or, at the very least, variety. *Unreal Championship 2* is a game built for slick chaos, meaning that one-on-one encounters feel empty rather than tense, but that arenas busy with combatants become sped-up war zones of acrobatic leaps, rocket splashes and frenzied sword duels. It's a fact that seems a little lost on the wealth of singleplayer offline battles, too many of which are head-to-head confrontations. Otherwise, the offline campaigns are strong enough in selection and setup, if not story, to provide a solid bot-based experience.

The game's brutal speed is facilitated by its excellent 3D engine, providing levels of a dramatic scale and crispness, with harsh lighting and sharp, rich detail that's almost as gratuitous as its clichéd combatants; its looks are always striking, if not always stylishly pretty. It's technically accomplished enough to very nearly carry off its hyperactive agility, too; wall boosts, mid-air dashes and double jumps soon become natural, but the multiple wall jumps required to reach certain areas feel slightly clumsy. And it's not the switch between first- and thirdperson perspectives that's a weakness; it's more the wooliness of the melee combos. Though flashier, they feel somewhat detached when compared to the satisfying clunk of braining someone with a rifle butt in *Halo 2*.

Unreal Championship 2 is an ambitious and largely successful attempt to meld the accuracy of traditional firstperson battling with the extra spatial agility and awareness afforded by thirdperson movement. It does feel slightly overdone, but not to the point of obscuring its offering of intense and flighty action. Adrenaline powers, for example – an intimidating selection of temporary boosts spread out over two pop-up menus – soon become a valued and accessible resource once the layout is committed to memory. It's typical of the game, really, as initial drawbacks are converted into later rewards. And, as exchange rates go, *Unreal Championship 2* has one of the strongest currencies around when it comes to hectic deathmatch combat. **[8]**





One interesting post-match stat is KPH, or kills per hour, based on extrapolated performance. A welcome number of options is available, too, such as target adhesion, and your preferred perspective for certain weapons

Action transaction

As well as being pumped up with elaborate combat details and options, *Unreal Championship 2* is also surprisingly streamlined in certain ways. Weapons aren't reloaded, and only three gun slots are available – basic, energy and explosive – with the weapons themselves chosen before the match begins. This means that ammo pick-ups strewn around the field are based on category, as opposed to specific gun type, almost removing the urge to camp, and promoting the use of the entire map. Quad damage pick-ups are still prone to this, although mutators are available to inhibit such cheap behaviour.

Block design differs wildly from planet to planet, and there's no question that it taxes your patience while your brain learns to adjust to the new colours and shapes



METEOS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£24) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: ((QB)) DEVELOPER: Q? ENTERTAINMENT

There's an easy answer to the question, What is *Meteos*? It's the sister title to the PSP's *Lumines*. The reason for the pat comparison is that both handheld puzzlers are the work of Q? Entertainment, Tetsuya Mizuguchi's new boutique studio. But rather than being a lazy shorthand, it turns out to be an unusually insightful label: *Meteos* is *Lumines*' sister, and she's ransacked her make-up box and raided her CD collection.



The top screen has a range of uses, from an eye-candy mode, which lets you see the inhabitants of each planet, to an overview screen – handy for spotting item blocks

That's not to suggest *Meteos* is just a clumsy clone – it has a look and dynamic all its own. Blocks (which are really ore-rich meteors) fall from the sky, and you must use the stylus to rearrange their vertical order, dragging blocks up and down the columns to make matching groups of three. Line up three, vertically or horizontally, and they reach critical mass, exploding in a rocket blast that causes the blocks above them to lift off and power back into space. It's nowhere close to being that simple, however, as each world has its own distinct gravity, altering the lift needed to blast the blocks clear. On some planets a simple chain of three will be enough to lift a fat tower of blocks into oblivion; on others you'll need to re-order the block in the air, forming new combos and new rockets to edge it over the horizon.

It's a complex system, but one which you adapt to very quickly – after all, judging simple vectors is what the human brain does with ease. It means that the first few seconds of each level are an exercise in experimentation, familiarising yourself with the feel of the world, and establishing your strategy for setting up gratifyingly explosive combos. As familiarity with the game grows, however, even these seconds become unnecessary, as the visual and audio theme of each world is sufficiently distinctive to quickly form a subconscious memory of the specific local conditions.

This is where *Lumines*' influence shows through, but *Meteos* takes that game's meticulous approach to synaesthesia and larks around with it like a four-year-old in a pair of her big sister's stilettos. So the action on screen adds sound effects and flourishes to the music with exuberant and unpredictable abandon, and each world has inhabitants and landscapes picked to harmonise with the soundscape you create with your combos. At times it borders on the cacophonous (although the music can always be turned off) but it's always charismatic.





Item blocks, which you unlock by investing your hard-earned ore at the shop, can have a dramatic effect on the course of a game. Most run off timers, so – contrary to your instincts – you'll need to concentrate on keeping them on screen until they activate

The core appeal of *Meteos* could perhaps have been predicted – the enduring, absorbing appeal of a good block puzzle married with the style and spirit we've come to expect from Mizuguchi's games. But the surprise that *Meteos* brings is the satisfaction of its physics. There's real weight in the way an underpowered meteor chunk sinks down to earth, and a sense of dynamic propulsion as you flick together a cluster of gravity-defying rockets. Quite an accomplishment for a quirky little sister. **[8]**

Ore inspiring



Firing the meteors back into space enables you to gather the ore that they carry. Charitably, the game lets you collect from all the blocks you clear, regardless of whether or not you complete the level. This ore can then be used to build new planets as well as to buy new items (which fall as blocks and can help or hinder your progress), and to unlock a brilliantly bewildering library of tunes and sound effects.



THE RUMBLE FISH

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥5,800 (£30)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: SEGA/SAMMY
DEVELOPER: DIMPS PREVIOUSLY IN: E134

Special delivery



Rumble Fish's special gauge is innovative, working on three levels. Attack moves fill an offensive gauge that runs from left to right along the bottom the screen. When this fills you can trigger a typically exuberant special attack. Conversely, defence moves and blocks will slowly see a defensive gauge filled which, when full, allows a character's defensive special to be performed. If you wait until both gauges are full, you have the option of the character's critical special – the most powerful move in the arsenal. The system works fairly well but is surprisingly restrictive, forcing players to use the particular move they've been powering up rather than allowing the choice players are used to in the game's competitors.

Soul. That indefinable something that can take a good videogame and make it a classic is all the more desirable in the 2D fighter genre, where the technicalities of the form are so deeply etched and established. It's not just a case of finding a dragon punch-esque glove to perfectly fit a quarter-turn hand. Neither is it simply about synergising instantly unforgettable characters with animation fluid enough to allow player and avatar to act as one. Nor is it only a case of assimilating the special-move systems of benchmark titles that have gone before, distilling and refining until you have a mechanic that is at once unique and yet familiar. The 2D fighting soul is more than the sum of these parts. But, in a genre based on the passions of primeval engagement, a game without soul will fast become a game without followers.

On paper, *Rumble Fish*, Sammy's latest attempt to forge a new fighting series in the wake of *Guilty Gear*'s own distinctive and, crucially, ongoing popularity, should succeed. Combos and special moves trip off the controller with ease for the accomplished *Street Fighter* or *King Of Fighters* player. The move lists, while perhaps a little undernourished, are varied enough, striking a good balance of long and short range attacks. Smooth-flowing showboating juggle combos will come quickly to the skilful or practised and there's a diverse, if unremarkable, character roster. The novel approach to the special gauge (see 'Special delivery') is interesting and yet straightforward enough to get to inspire commitment to uncovering its intricacies.

But, after prolonged play, these technical plans fail to conjure real passion. The marionette approach to animation, whereby limbs appear superimposed on to torsos, creates an unnecessary visual distinction between player and avatar. While it allows graphical gimmicks, such as clothes to tear and rip during play, it's a constant reminder you are controlling a puppet; there is no illusion of amalgamation. This is exacerbated by an occasional delay in the input cause and output effect of the controls. While the pause is largely only split-second, it further undermines that all-important relationship between a player and their character where a split second can win or lose a fight.

The 2D fighters were born in the arcades and, of all genres, they retain this DNA most overtly. *Rumble Fish* has largely failed to set the viciously critical arcade scene alight. On paper, it's hard to explain exactly why, but once in your hand the reason becomes clearer. As the pool of 2D fighter fans dries up, maybe it's a case of survival of the fittest. There's no room for competent titles curiously lacking in soul: here more than anywhere, that's the one thing they need for immortality. **[6]**



An on-screen heads-up alerts you to when you have landed a counter, reverse, dodge or advanced attack







The 3D backgrounds are reminiscent of the *Capcom Vs SNK* series, but there is less animation and each arena is far more forgettable. A sequel has already been announced for spring in Japanese arcades



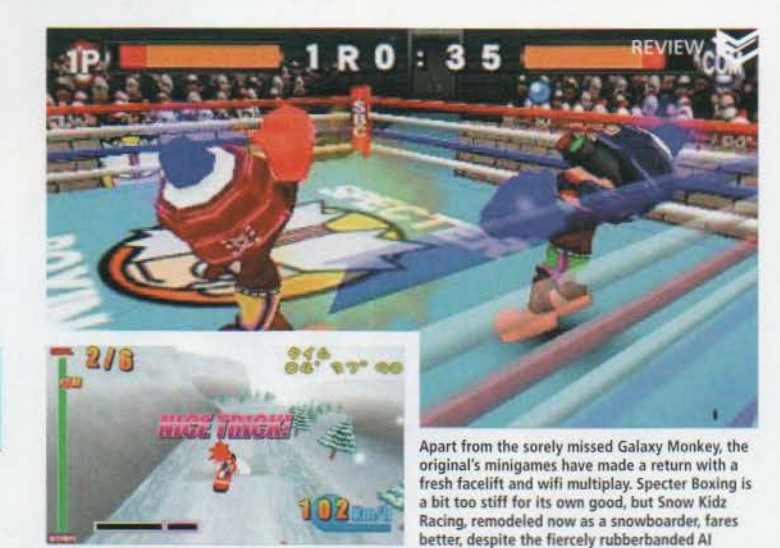


Players expecting the frenetic pacing of Sammy's *Guilty Gear* games will be disappointed. *Rumble Fish* is more sedentary and there is no free speed select mode



APE ESCAPE: ON THE LOOSE

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£21) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US/JPN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SCEJ)



Apart from the sorely missed Galaxy Monkey, the original's minigames have made a return with a fresh facelift and wifi multiplay. Specter Boxing is a bit too stiff for its own good, but Snow Kidz Racing, remodeled now as a snowboarder, fares better, despite the fiercely rubberbanded AI



As in the original PlayStation game, levels are designed to be returned to and explored further, with extra gadgets acquired later in the game giving access to awkward platforms



Without the traditional use of the L3/R3 buttons, a number of activities are actually easier to master. It illustrates the extent to which *Ape Escape* was (and is) driven by its controls

From the first moments of *On The Loose*'s announcement, any astute follower of the *Ape Escape* series will have noted that each copy of the game includes an elephant in the room. Just as Mario taught us what an analogue stick was for, one of Sony's primary directives with *Ape Escape* was to demonstrate – to players and developers alike – what might be possible with two. Every last part of the game was guided by the principle, from weapon and gadget design, to the inclusion of specific vehicles, down to the very minutiae of movement itself. With its reissue on to the MonoShocked PSP, the game loses that focus, and struggles bravely for relevance.

To its credit, Sony's solution is, for the most part, less awkward than you might imagine. All of the second stick's functions have been remapped to the face buttons, and each of the gadgets themselves have been uniquely reconfigured to work within the new scheme. In some cases, such as the Super Hoop and Sky Flyer, the reduction from frenetic stick twirling to standard button press makes them a great deal more graceful to use. Others don't fare as well – the RC Car in particular, whose control, in a last-ditch effort, was moved to the D-pad, making simultaneous movement and use of the car (one of the purest pleasures of the original) impossible, and transforming it instead into a naggingly staccato affair as you alternately position yourself, the car and a camera that's now fighting to keep you both in view. All of these issues can't manage to fully distract from what still remains one of Sony Japan's finest legacy products. Less linear and more exploratory than its official sequel, the game does an excellent job of blending calculated hide-and-seek with wildly chaotic hot pursuit, and is perhaps still the closest gaming has come to recreating the classic cartoon foot chase, straight down to the endless-circles-around-a-tree and in-one-door-and-out-a-completely-different-one feints. While it can't completely avoid the ages-old sand/snow/fire/grass pitfalls of level design, it does eventually counterbalance them with uncommon selections such as the spaghetti western movie set, a Shinto shrine and a trip down a dinosaur's gullet.

Though it's regrettable that Sony opted for a retrofit rather than a rebirth, and while series stalwarts might initially balk at controls that fit awkwardly, given a chance the cat-and-mouse charm shines through, and makes *On The Loose* a fine first stab at a new wave of portable platforming. **[6]**



Aside from an options menu, enemy encyclopedia and model viewer, Ape Ping Pong, pictured here, is the sole segment of genuinely new content. A masterwork it's not, but it does make for an interesting multiplayer diversion, with a light amount of sidespin and smash strategy, and a playable roster expandable by catching more monkeys in the main adventure





While the game hasn't seen a major poly overhaul, the textures have been greatly enhanced, giving *On the Loose* the razor-sharp crispness the original has always deserved



Harmonix's fusion of music appreciation and gaming challenge didn't miss the mark – it overshot it to somewhere extraordinary

Somewhere amid the thunder and lightning of *Frequency*'s Expert mode comes a moment rare in videogames – a moment of clarity. At a point of equilibrium with the controller, the sight of the tunnel and the sound of the music, you feel the game's hand on your heart. 'Stop thinking. Stop trying', it says. 'Stop fighting and see'. The immersion barrier lifts and, suddenly, you feel as if you're climbing an endless lattice of light, back to where everything begins. Back to where gaming begins.

Not that first encounters make this obvious. Initially, the game resembles little more than a mildly distracting, visually attractive product of the rhythm-action genre: a miscellany of strobes and beats to keep dyed-in-the-wool clubbers tapping their heels in time with their squares and circles. A minute or so of opening FMV revives dire memories of Ebenezer Goode – cyberpunk revelry, overblown DJs and neon imagery to which the passage of time has been particularly unfair. Hardly the ideal billboard for what lies



TIME EXTEND

FREQUENCY

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **2002**

beyond – an experience that pulls together all of music's power into a modest package before exploding, shaking the gaming landscape with a suitably harmonic boom.

Until *Frequency*, the ideology of the rhythm-action genre towards its subject fell grossly short of its potential. Music was an inflexible backdrop, vaguely connected to the test of reflexes that typically comprised gameplay, and was largely divorced from the player. An experiment was needed – something to dissect, analyse and exploit the impact of melodies and percussion on the human spirit. Why does good music raise your heartbeat and tighten your skin to goosebumps? What happens, more specifically, when a game bypasses those intermediate devices such as genre and story, and instead aims directly for the sensory core and opens fire? Give me control over he who shapes the music of a nation, declared Napoleon, and I care not who makes the laws. What would be produced, asked Harmonix, if gamers could wield the same creative power via a DualShock as they could via turntables or a mixing desk? What if that were just the beginning?

In providing answers, the studio redefined music as it had previously been applied to games. *Frequency* takes players inside the acts of both appreciation and performance, plunging its hands into the conventions of Bemani and similar 2D systems, and tearing them apart. Levels are still songs played from beginning to end, but not before they've been blown to atoms and sewn back together as a viable gaming canvas. Every major note struck by every major instrument, every major vocal and digital effect is scattered into shimmering tracks of geometric jewels, joined side by side and wrapped into a now-unmistakable tunnel. The jewels occupy three positions within a track like notes on a vertical stave, each mapped to a button on the DualShock controller. There are two configurations, but









Together with a contained field of vision, *Frequency*'s HUD never threatens to lure the eyes away from the action, requiring only brief adjustments of focus to take everything in. To the left, the energy bar ruthlessly clicks down unless phases are consistently chained; on the right, there's a visual progress bar not unlike that of a media player

BEATS INTERNATIONAL

FreqNet – the game's online component – has brought together scores of both *Frequency* and *Amplitude* owners, keen to demonstrate their mastery of the games' alternate play modes. Multiplayer games (also playable offline) are intriguing in their attempt to inject a competitive element into a strongly personal experience. New offensive power-ups, such as the Crippler and Bumper, are introduced to ensure that, while players jostle for control of high scoring tracks, no one is guaranteed the upper hand. Remix mode, meanwhile, ups the creativity while removing the score, along with all but the innate challenge of composition. Rather than strike existing notes, players lay down their own in custom loops that are then built into entire songs – savable, sharable and playable online. While many players would eventually desert FreqNet amid complaints about cheating and general etiquette, it still ranks as one of console gaming's more successful online endeavours.

most will come to respect only one: L1, R1 and R2 – three buttons that quickly lodge in the subconscious like the strings of a guitar or the notes of a piano. Advancing through this tunnel of sound at a speed appropriate to its rhythm, the player must strike notes as they pass beneath a trio of wireframe reticules. A melodic sequence of jewels is a 'phase', the striking of which ignites the entire track and leaves it playing until, come a predetermined point, the song reverts to a basic rhythm and the tracks reopen for capture. It's the strategy to which this engine is applied that fuels its acceleration. High scores can only be attained by chaining together 'streaks' of phases – capturing one before moving, via the D-pad, on to the next, without missing a beat. Succeed and you receive a multiplier; succeed again and the multiplier increases; fail and the multiplier is lost. Capture every available track before they reset and you'll momentarily have control of the Freestyler – a freeform scratchpad that provides both a bridge for your multiplier and an aural celebration of a job well done. Furthermore, certain phases consist of special jewels that, when captured, grant a power-up to the player. The Multiplier increases your capacity for maximising score beyond its usual limit; the Autocatcher will capture an entire track automatically – essential for maintaining a streak when you botch that first jewel. From the moment a song begins, your path to the highest possible score is always evolving. You can plan the perfect path, bounding from one track to the next while avoiding awkward multitrack jumps, but what if you miss a note? What if the key to achieving a high score involves sacrificing a streak for a distant power-up? Will the path you've chosen waste a x6 multiplier on a simple sequence for meagre reward, or gloriously convert the most demanding phase in the song?

The songs teasingly unconquerable to all but the deftest talents, the game thriving on its ability to have the player surprise themselves as their proficiency blooms

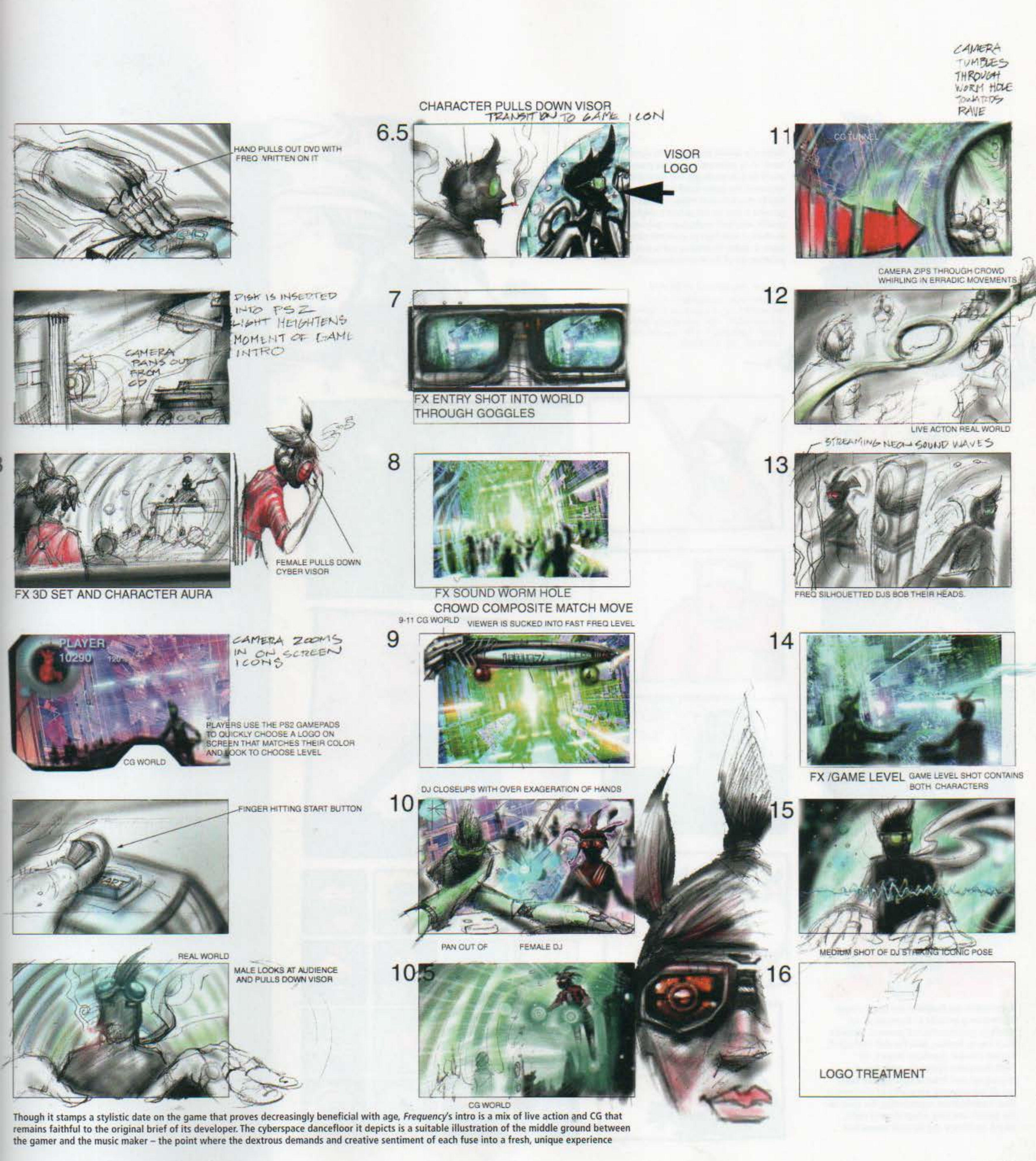
Strategic refinement and player fulfilment – not something you'd expect of either the genre or a company that's chosen, as its turf, an experimental middleground between music and gaming. But, three years on from its release, there are devotees who still test the boundaries both of *Frequency* and their own capacity for playing it. Few games, in truth, have as much reason to champion their own learning curve. With the entire game unlocked and available for repeat play, comparable challenge exists at all levels. A level that bombards the player with a confounding myriad of notes will score highly by virtue of mere completion, but wringing something impressive from the desert of a simple melody requires a different approach. Score attacks here are as dedicated and versatile a challenge as you'll find anywhere, the songs teasingly unconquerable to all but the deftest talents, the game thriving on its ability to have the player surprise themselves as their proficiency blooms.

Upon reaching Expert mode, *Frequency* becomes less a game and more a fluent conversation between itself and the subconscious registers in your brain. Previously confounding patterns of notes can suddenly resemble hole-punched cards being fed into a perfect analytical machine. From the current phase to its oncoming potential successors and then on to the distant power-ups that further decide your strategy, your mental focus darts between a dazzling array of concerns at, typically, over 100 beats per minute, with up to nine notes to strike in a second. It may require hours of practice and an open mind to get it right, but the reward is little short of a subconscious awakening. That's no glib overstatement: at its core, *Frequency* plays some very straightforward tricks with your brain chemistry.

The rush that comes when a phase is captured and as the music unfolds behind a crashing wave of light – that's the anticipation/fulfilment



The audiovisual interaction between spectator and game is different to that of the player – more conscious and appreciative of the intricate design



Though it stamps a stylistic date on the game that proves decreasingly beneficial with age, *Frequency*'s intro is a mix of live action and CG that remains faithful to the original brief of its developer. The cyberspace dancefloor it depicts is a suitable illustration of the middle ground between the gamer and the music maker – the point where the dextrous demands and creative sentiment of each fuse into a fresh, unique experience



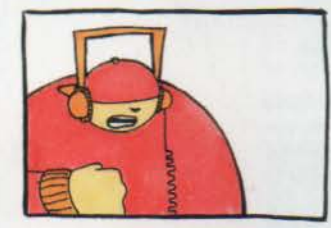
Harmonix would be the first to agree that music is as personal a creative process as you'll find. Accordingly, the disembodied nature of the game itself is juxtaposed with highly characteristic Freqs – avatars that provide a face to the player's singleplayer profile and their multiplayer presence. Not so much a selection as a construction, they come in many distinctive parts and vibrant palettes, all of them interchangable



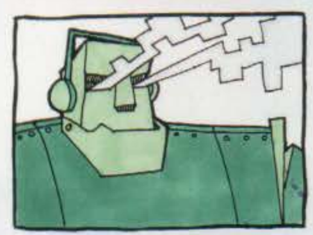








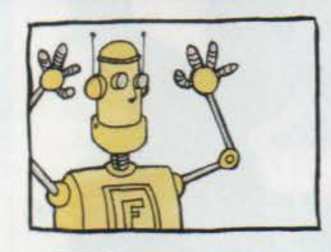












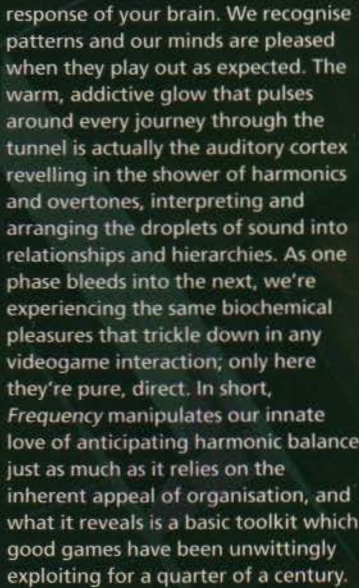








Rage within the machine: the latter stages of *Frequency* provide a showcase of its creators' genuine musical prowess. Pictured from top to bottom, Josh Randall (Robotkid), Kasson Crooker (Symbion Project, DJ HMX, Komputer Kontroller, member of Freezepop) and Peter Maguire (Inter:sekt) are all consummate purveyors of electronica, their contributions representing the peak of the game's uncanny integration of sight, sound, challenge and musical interaction



response of your brain. We recognise patterns and our minds are pleased when they play out as expected. The warm, addictive glow that pulses around every journey through the tunnel is actually the auditory cortex revelling in the shower of harmonics and overtones, interpreting and arranging the droplets of sound into relationships and hierarchies. As one phase bleeds into the next, we're experiencing the same biochemical pleasures that trickle down in any videogame interaction; only here they're pure, direct. In short, *Frequency* manipulates our innate love of anticipating harmonic balance just as much as it relies on the inherent appeal of organisation, and what it reveals is a basic toolkit which good games have been unwittingly exploiting for a quarter of a century.

In *Frequency*, the player is effectively a lab rat engaged in mutually beneficial research. The BPM and genre of every song is made clear prior to selection, like side effects marked on pill bottles. Evocative and precise, they read more like Philip K Dick than Rolling Stone – 'Welcome to the electric pharmacy, where flavours range from Beats In Space and Melodica to Bionic Sonic Beats'. As a reminder, midway through his band's exclusive contribution, Fear Factory's Burton C Bell tolls out the game's doctrine like a mantra: "What is," he roars, "your frequency?" By that point, of course, your senses are too embroiled in a maelstrom of industrial drum'n'bass to make the question seem particularly necessary.

As game playlists go, *Frequency*'s generous line-up is quite unlike any you'll encounter (even in its sequel, *Amplitude*). The game casts its net far





across the plain of '90s music at the turn of the millennium. It hops from the chart-friendly alternative of No Doubt to the downbeat rumblings of Jack Dangers' Meat Beat Manifesto, from The Crystal Method to the eloquent techno of Oakenfold and the fuzzy lust-rock of Curve. Admittedly, there's a steady undercurrent of beat-heavy electronica, but considering the game's target there are few more effective weapons. As Expert mode nears its zenith, the Harmonix team itself drops some truly devilish tracks in the player's path, packed with enough transcendental brilliance to turn a living room into a moment from Altered States.

Left drifting in this abstract world, you're bombarded with the kind of imagery the brain usually creates for its own amusement, like the spots we see before our eyes

'Transcendental' is an easy word to throw at *Frequency*, but one that is surprisingly apt. At the most basic level, we connect with *Frequency*'s kaleidoscopic assault because there's an audiovisual cue behind most of what we see. The trick to the game's visual experience is the lack of elaboration – a thin frame and the trio of note-grabbing reticules are the only form we're given, and even compared to *Rez* that's a minimal form indeed. Left drifting in this abstract world, you're bombarded with the kind of imagery the brain usually creates for its own amusement. The game throws you sparks, for example, like the spots we see before our eyes – the crystalline slithers that dance in your peripheral vision when you rub your eyes too hard. This subconscious library of clip-art is something common to all human brains, and it's something *Frequency* trades off time and time again. See if you recognise a few: grids, lattices, expanding and contracting hexagonal patterns, fretworks, parallel lines, a visual field dominated by a central light. You'll admittedly find the bygone age of gaming littered with such basic geometry, but all together, superimposed, rotated and replicated within a pulsing spectrum of light? Little before it has used so keenly, and so purely, these basic triggers that make it easy for your brain to enjoy the trip, to derive a base level of pleasure from doing what it does best: anticipating patterns, hearing harmonies, seeing stars...

Was this Harmonix's intention all along? To harvest the brain's basic biology to make a calculatingly irresistible videogame? It's not as preposterous a question as it might sound: the game's inherent coherence is proof enough of these connections and their relevance. Something of a leap of faith, however, would be required to suggest deliberate intent behind them all. The developers can thank their lucky guiding stars that, alongside their intended achievements, they've also enjoyed the benefits of coincidence. What began as an opportunity for gamers to exploit their common ground with musicians has evolved, through creative audio/visual synergy, into something which, in moving away from so many gaming norms, ends up illuminating a crucial aspect of that enduring mystery: why do we like games?

It's the team's subsequent approach to *Amplitude* that consolidates such an argument. The sequel moves almost directly away from the first game's accidental profundity. There is no tunnel, replaced as it is by a sinuous horizontal plane that doesn't wrap when you hit the edge (arguments still rage as to the positive or negative effect that it has on gameplay). The capture reticule is no longer comprised of elegant geometry but of a large, three-pronged ship that beams sci-fi decals on to the track – sleek but overtly suggestive. A new power-up – the Slowmo – provides a neat effect by dragging the entire song down to a crawl before ramping it back up, interrupting the crucial flow of pattern, rhythm and harmony. There are more stars of light, more elaborate pyrotechnics, but these elaborations only weaken the fundamental power that the first game's basic patterns exercised over player's minds. In becoming what many argue is a better videogame, *Amplitude* lost the direct connection with the player's most basic instincts.

And it's this that is *Frequency*'s final irony. A game that is pure abstraction has a more sophisticated effect on the human brain – and on human emotion – than many games that invest months of development and square inches of disc-space on story, character and dialogue. Videogames have been making us cry for years. That's the easy bit. But a game that teaches you something, that makes you understand why you want to play games in the first place? That's real brain food.



FREQUENT FLYERS

Had *Frequency* been declared a religion, someone would have built a church. Officially, it wasn't – but that didn't stop someone building a website instead. Within weeks of its launch, fansite www.freq.com was inundated with forum threads exchanging scores and techniques alongside rapturous praise for the game and its creators. With the arrival of *Amplitude*, umpteen musical wishlists (few of them practical) had already been cobbled together in anticipation. Doing his part to keep the raft afloat, Harmonix's Josh Randall enlisted under his Robotkid alias and established dialogue with players. Though debate over the prospect of *Frequency 3* seems to have formed a stale cap over the old lines of discussion, the remix modes still inspire fresh material. Freqremixes.net, for example, still turns over regular news and bolsters its song depository with new creations.



If there's a rush that comes with capturing a vital string of power-up gems, there's an equivalent agony to be felt if, while concentrating on a hop to the next phase, you somehow botch the last note



THE MAKING OF... ADVANCE WARS

The 'game the GBA was made for' was first made for the NES. How did such an old title define the new handheld generation?

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **GBA** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS** ORIGIN: **JAPAN** RELEASE: **2001**

Playing *Advance Wars* is a painstaking process. It's not so much trial and error as trial and education, each mistake teaching you a little more about the impeccable clockwork that powers the game's simple, stunning mechanics. And, it turns out, playing *Advance Wars* isn't a very different process from making *Advance Wars*. Its creators at Intelligent Systems have been studying their creation over four generations – from the exuberant, unforgiving NES original, to the skeletal appeal of the Game Boy version and the lavish charm of the SNES title, culminating in the near perfection of *Advance Wars* itself. Each version adds something, takes something else away, a painstaking process of experimentation within a set of rules perfectly balanced between complexity and comprehensibility.

For a game that has become the cornerstone of any sane GBA collection, however, its genesis was a little scrappy. "The project was started when we were working on the original launch titles for the GBA," explains director **Kentaro Nishimura**, "and, to be honest, Nintendo was already too busy, we had too many jobs to do, so we had to ask Intelligent Systems to share the responsibility of making *Advance Wars*." It was, of course, a responsibility Intelligent Systems had always borne before, but this time around Nintendo was keeping a close eye on the game's development. "At the early stages, it's just IS developers who get together and come up with unique game ideas," confirms director **Makoto Shimojo**. "But when we

Each version adds something, takes something else away, a painstaking process of experimentation within a set of rules



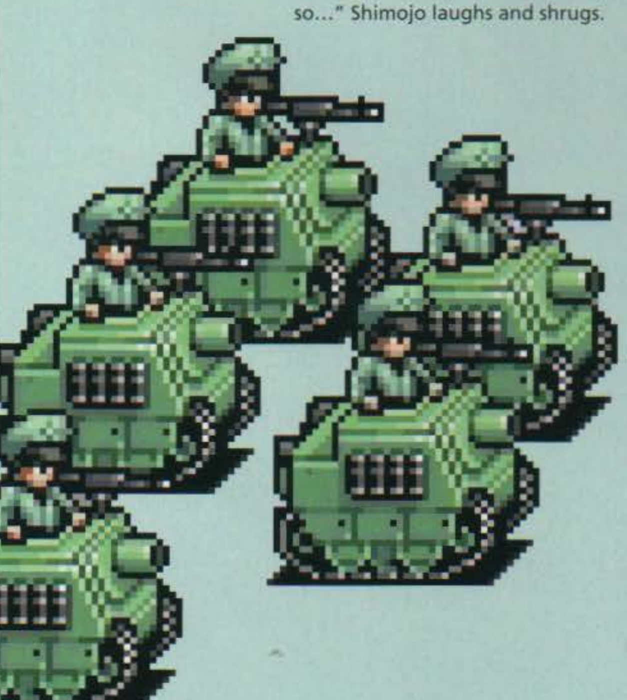




Vehicle design is one of *Advance Wars'* greatest strengths. The team had no particular era in mind when produced the designs, and freely raided the history books for inspiration

present to Nintendo, their observations are nearly always: 'That's too sophisticated, that's not balanced for a general audience'. And that's when we start working on the adjustments."

Those adjustments were tied in inextricably with the platform they were designing for. "We were aiming at the GBA's target audience – relatively young children – and at that time I thought they would like the pop design – the bright colours and rounded characters – and the comedy elements, so we applied that kind of approach to the design and the interface. Of course, when we got feedback from the game we discovered that it had sold mostly to teenage boys, so..." Shimojo laughs and shrugs.



Were there ever any concerns about tailoring such a cerebral game to a portable machine and a young audience? "Yeah, you're right," says Shimojo. "At the very beginning we were very aware that we were going to be asking people to play for long periods of time and that the game was going to be quite hard. So we thought, why don't we make it so the game has a cycle, a wave from a period of excitement to another? If you look at long films, they keep people's attention by varying the pace, by mixing moments of excitement with moments of calm. So that's what we tried to do. I don't know if it quite worked out, but that was our original idea."

There's no doubt that these efforts were successful – for many, the total coherence of *Advance Wars'* vibrant art style, despite seeming as ready to draw its inspiration from Citroën's back catalogue as local manga traditions, was what drew them to a genre they'd previously ignored. But once you've pulled new players to a strategy game, how do you keep them there? Shimojo acknowledges the problem: "There are people who really like to play action games, games which give you instant feedback without having to think too much about anything. But what's interesting about *Advance Wars* is that the team who made it are not avid sim games fans. They are people who love *Beatmania*, who love shooting games and fighting games. For example, I'm an avid racing game fan. And all those people joined together to make the game, and because each member has different tastes, they tried to pick up the best elements of other genres and incorporate them, even though sometimes they had to do it very subtly! For example, one of the most important elements is how you move each unit. It's important that the player doesn't feel any stress when they do that. So the guy who loves shooting games came up with the way of moving, so there's no stress and you feel you can control everything right down to the perfect centimetre. And the guys who love music games helped with the timing, trying to get the tempo right, to make a rhythm with the way you move the units. So those kind of elements – the entertaining elements – are the kind of things which usually aren't











Harnessing each character's CO power, or special attack, is crucial for gaining the game's sometimes elusive S ranks. Their basic abilities – if not their looks – are familiar from early versions of the game

included in simulation games, but they are a core part of the *Advance Wars* experience."

And so, with its appealing art, engaging story and entertaining interaction, *Advance Wars* became the approachable face of strategy. Was the team worried they might alienate the sometimes rather serious-minded fans of wargames? "We wanted as many people as possible to enjoy playing *Advance Wars*, but I also thought we were trying to cater to the needs of avid simulation fans, who would know all about the weapons and care about the tiny details of the costumes," explains Shimojo. "So we follow real history, we try to preserve the spirit of the weapons and the arsenals, but everything is deformed rather than duplicated. But professional eyes can see through all that. They can say: 'Oh, I understand that they are replicating the core aspects of the real weapons', and they like that."

This pattern, of preserving the heart but stylising the surface, extends to the game's story and atmosphere: "It doesn't mean the contents of the game need to be gritty and realistic. We weren't trying to create a make-believe war, but we believe it can still be sophisticated. We tried to make sure that people would believe the way people talk to each other and make that feel real, even if the way we show war isn't realistic."

"We tried to make sure that people would believe the way people talk to each other, even if the way we show war isn't realistic"

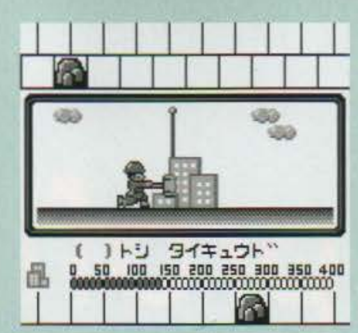
For all these efforts to make *Advance Wars*' appeal as broad as possible, there were still no plans to release the game outside Japan, just as the previous games in the series had never seen an overseas release. "When I joined Nintendo," says Nishimura, "I was told that these kinds of games would never be successful abroad, because they were turn-based games, and turn-based games weren't appreciated outside Japan. But we decided it was because these kind of games were too complicated. People are used to action games and shooting games, and in those all you have to do is press the A button and the B button and you'll soon understand how to play. But for SRPGs, you've got to know the rules before you start. So, with *Advance Wars*, even though there wasn't a plan to release it outside Japan, we made it really easy to play. We put a really good tutorial in, so people didn't need to read the manual. And when the US marketing people played it they came to us and said: 'But this is

WARGAMES

Despite being perhaps the most non-threatening wargame ever, *Advance Wars* became bizarrely caught up in one of the most serious moments in recent world history. Released in the US on September 11 2001, many players have mixed memories of their first experiences of the game. It was due to be released soon after in the UK, but Nintendo became afflicted with a somewhat hypersensitive case of cold feet about marketing a game with the world 'war' in the title, and delayed the release till into 2002. Unusually enough, it was Japan which drew the shortest straw, only getting its hands on the game in November 2004 as part of this handsome package featuring the game's sequel, *Black Hole Rising*.




上半身にポイントを!
・頭良し
・プライド高し
・悪そう





Despite being reincarnated across Game Boy, NES and SNES, the game has always remained instantly recognisable. Only the GBC versions (above) – farmed out to Hudson – stand out





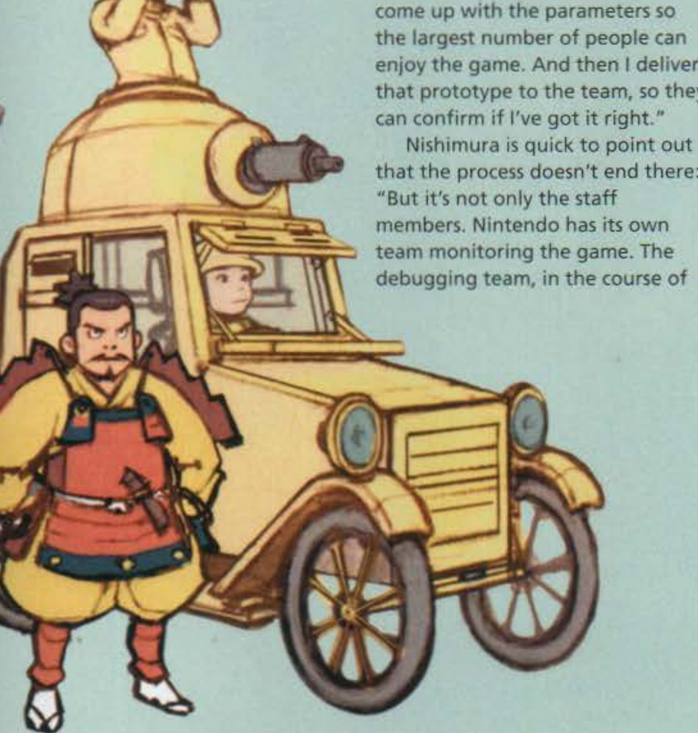
The Japanese-only NES and SNES versions remain well worth playing, although they don't rely on predeployed maps and have a more strategic EXP system which levels up each unit

great! Why can't we sell it over here?' And it seems that *Advance Wars'* success has shifted Nintendo's attitude over western tastes." Nishimura, who also worked as director on *Fire Emblem*, makes it clear that game would never have been released in the west had *AW* not paved the way.

But all of this work, no matter how meticulous and imaginative, is only the window dressing. What matters about *Advance Wars* is its clockwork heart, the cogs and gears which would make the game as engrossing to play on the back of an envelope as on an LCD screen. Does it take a great deal of work to balance the game? "Exactly," says Shimojo. "After all, repetition is the only way to make a good simulation game. I am the person who judges whether or not the balancing is good enough, so I have to play maps over and over and over again to be sure. Of course, the problem is that I get accustomed to the game, so it becomes hard to imagine what it must be like for a novice, but my goal is always to come up with the parameters so the largest number of people can enjoy the game. And then I deliver that prototype to the team, so they can confirm if I've got it right."

Nishimura is quick to point out that the process doesn't end there: "But it's not only the staff members. Nintendo has its own team monitoring the game. The debugging team, in the course of doing their work, monitor the game very closely and we listen to what they think about the balance. And, if necessary, right up to the end of the project, we can still make adjustments. And then there are other people who check the balance ever more carefully. The fact of the matter is that we keep checking and checking until – well, until after the company is yelling and saying: 'Stop it, stop it, we really have to launch it now'." He laughs. "It's because of that fact that I believe we have come up with a high-quality game."

But for all these efforts, Shimojo is realistic about the impossibility of pleasing all of the people all of the time: "I have worked on hundreds of different maps, and I think I understand which type of person likes which type of map. I know there are people who like to start from a very weak position and gradually become strong and stronger and defeat the enemy. And there are people who want to be powerful from the start, who just want to crush their opponent. I realise that it is impossible to make a map which will appeal to everyone. So I try to make sure everyone will be able to say at some points: 'Here we go, here's one of my maps. This is what I was waiting for'."



And now what people are waiting for is *Advance Wars DS*. Can the series really evolve further, or is *Advance Wars* itself the perfected expression of Shimojo's vision of approachable strategy? "When we tried to get feedback on *Black Hole Rising* there were voices saying there wasn't enough change, that it wasn't *Advance Wars 2*, it was *Advance Wars 1.5*, and I think I have to admit they were right. So we've made proposals to Nintendo, and," he smiles, "they've made a lot of counter proposals, but I think we're ready to do something really different. People aren't going to say this is *Advance Wars 3*. They're going to say this is *Advance Wars 4*." Trial and education at work again. What better strategy could there be for making a better strategy game?

"When the US marketing people played it they came to us and said: 'But this is great! Why can't we sell it over here?'"



WORLDS APART

After years of collaboration between Nintendo and Intelligent Systems, the unexpected decision was made to switch development of the GC version of the game (which, in another deviation from tradition, isn't called *Cube Wars*, but *Advance Wars: Under Fire*) to the UK, where it's being made at Kuju. The decision to move away from the cool strategy of the series to more hot-headed action has caused some disquiet among fans of the series. Was Shimojo suprised by the decision to give the game to Kuju? "Frankly, yes, I was suprised. It makes me wonder what is happening that I don't know about." And what does he think of what he's seen so far? There is a pause, then: "It is very different. What I've seen so far is... beyond my imagination."

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev



COMPANY NAME: Denki

DATE FOUNDED: March 2000

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 13

HEAD OF STUDIO: Colin Anderson



URL: www.denki.co.uk

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Denki Blocks! (GBA, GBC, J2ME, iDTV), *Go! Go! Beckham!* (GBA), *Pac-Man* (iDTV), *Bips!* (iDTV), *Shrek* (iDTV)

KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE:
Handheld consoles, mobile phones, interactive television, entertainment product design/ specification (all platforms)



Colin Anderson's company has recently finished the multiplayer iDTV title *Liveplay Tetris* (left)





UK LOCATIONS:
Dundee, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS:
TBA

TECHNOLOGY

"Denki focuses on repertoire rather than technology. The company specialises in building high-quality, lively entertainment software suitable for limited-technology platforms and the mass market. Denki has expertise across a wide range of hardware including interactive television, Java-enabled mobile phones and the Game Boy Advance. With experience in reducing the risks associated with product development, Denki also provides entertainment product design, architecture and prototyping services. As a principle supplier to Sky's Gamestar service, Denki has established itself as a leader in the field of interactive television development, developing over 20 successful products in the last three years.

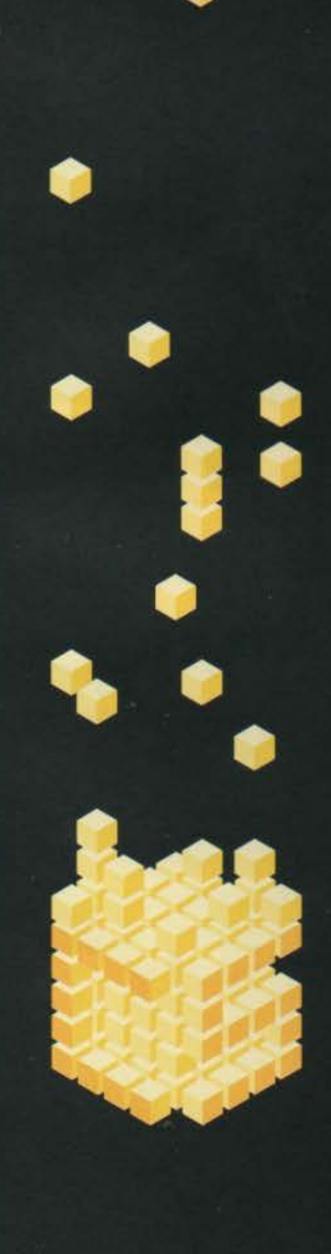
"The body of work ranges from original concepts (such as *Bips!*) through arcade conversion and enhancement (such as *Pac-Man*), to interpretations of high-profile brands such as Shrek. Denki's 'lateral' development approach provides the perfect method for building all types of products quickly and reliably to a high quality. Brands such as Tom And Jerry are typically taken from concept document to live broadcast in less than ten weeks."



Denki works closely with several IP holders, including The Cartoon Network on a Codename: Kids Next Door project

Eyeing the future

Next gen is always good for middleware, but character creation firms are looking to take advantage commercially as well as technologically





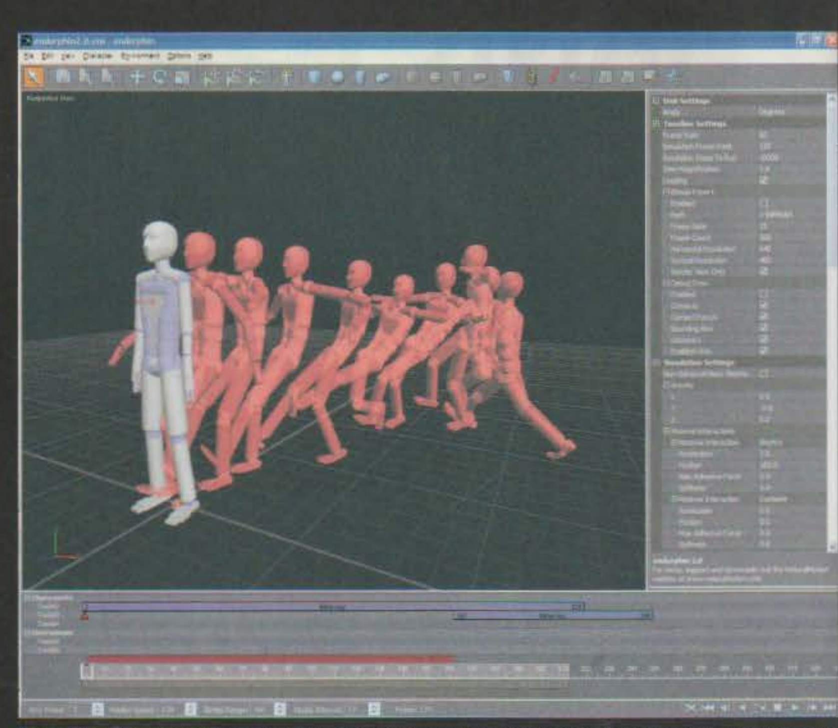
www.naturalmotion.com
www.genemation.com

Like personal injury lawyers chasing an ambulance siren, so middleware and tools companies rejoice in the announcement of new game consoles. New problems mean developers are interested in new solutions and that means the chance for new business. But the gleam in the eye of many specialists in the area of character creation and animation seems to go beyond the enthusiasm of the common-or-garden 'once in every five years' opportunity.

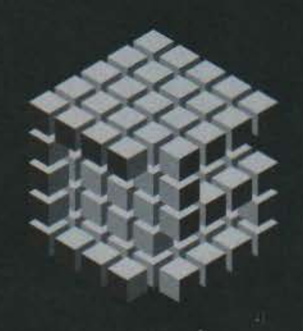
Part of the rational is the expected shift in graphical verisimilitude. "Next-gen hardware is going to enable the creation of extremely realistic environments, which means characters in sports games or movie-based games will need to look realistic or scenes won't look right. And they will need to animate realistically too," points out **John Bickley**, CEO of Genemation, a developer of face-synthesis tools which span out of computer vision research at Manchester University.

True, but in many respects so what? This has always been the situation at transition. There is a reason this is more than the purveyors of hammers talking up the difficulty of a new set of nails, however. What's particularly relevant for companies such as Genemation about this console re-generation is the hardware has the processing power to handle many of the more laborious art and animation tasks automatically at runtime.

"Realtime functionality is going to be vital," Bickley reckons. So as well as supporting current generation technology, Genemation's also working on a technology it labels GrunT. This will enable the auto-creation and animation



Natural Motion's Endorphin animation synthesis package, creating virtual characters, is well placed for next-gen consoles as it frees developers from having to laboriously create pre-canned animation, dramatically shifting the focus to runtime



of hundreds of 3D heads at runtime. "It will bring a significant advantage especially for games which require diverse and animated crowds," he says. "I think it has the potential to radically change existing character and animation pipelines."

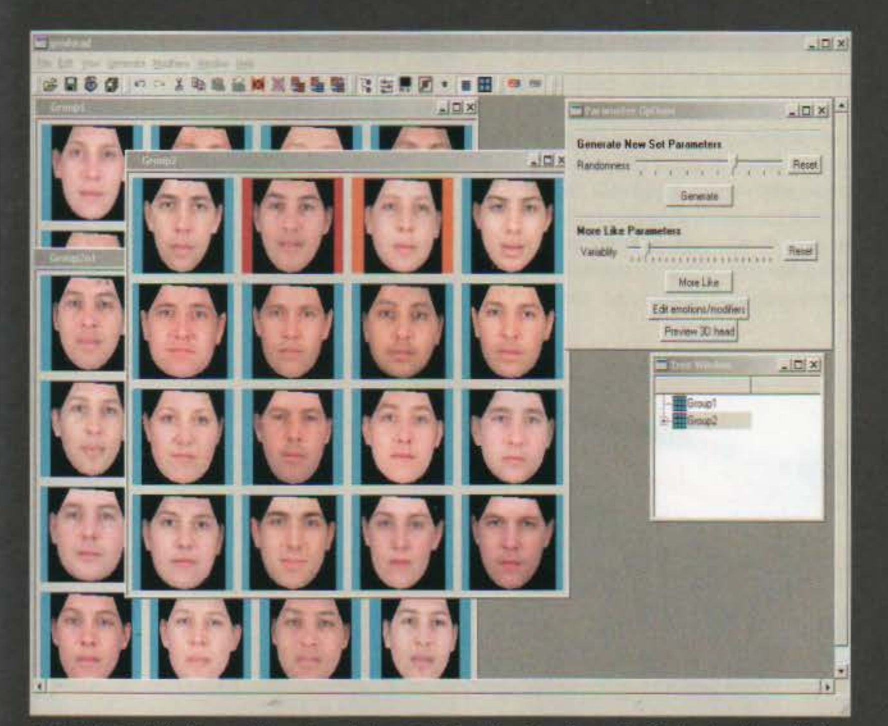
It's at this level that the technology may act as a disruptive play, especially in terms of the middleware business model. Up to this point, many of the smaller art and animation tools have been limited to the role of plug-ins within the pipelines mediated by industry-standard packages such as Autodesk's 3DS Max and Alias' Maya. Repositioned as realtime engine components, this is the opportunity to break out of that model, and particularly the pricing assumption, that sets them as supplementary elements.

One company which has always been wary about being locked into such a model is Oxford-based Natural Motion. Another example of a UK tools developer built on the back of university research, its standalone Endorphin animation product uses combination of artificial intelligence and biomechanics to generate character animation. Launched in 2002, Endorphin was initially marketed as 'motion capture in a box', highlighting the extreme moves it could generate which would be beyond the physical limits of any real-life capture actor.

But according to CEO **Torsten Reil**, the next-gen consoles mean it can move to a more central position in the game development process. "Animation is going to change dramatically in the next few years," he explains. "Essentially, we'll see a move away from the old canned paradigm, where everything is created beforehand and simply played back in the game at the appropriate times. Instead, animators will create dynamic behaviours, which will be used by the console's CPUs to synthesise interactive animations on the fly. For animators, this means working at a higher level. For us toolmakers, it means giving animators everything they need to add personality and signature to their characters."

The key feature for Natural Motion is that Endorphin works by creating what is, in effect, a 'virtually alive' character which reacts in a realistic manner in terms of its biomechanical aspects. So instead of an animator having to manually keyframe individual limb movements, they can link together sets of metabehaviours such as 'run', 'jump' and 'protect head', which the character will follow as closely as is possible in terms of its biomechanical constraints. In this respect, at least, motion is inherent in the character, allowing the animator to take an overall role akin to a director rather than having to deal with the actions of each individual actor. This synthesis of animation – the company describes its technology as dynamic motion synthesis – also plays well within the wider architecture of Sony and Microsoft's consoles. These will offer a significant improvement in processor power but a relative drop in memory capacity. In such a world, calculating animation on the fly is much more efficient than moving around large amounts of animation data from DVD to RAM.

It's for this reason that Reil suggests standalone tools will be a significant factor in next-gen development. "Packages such as Maya, 3DS Max and XSI are powerful pieces of software, so it's natural people want new tools integrated in these existing pipelines," he says. "And in many cases that makes sense. Often, however, you need to build a bespoke environment to really harness the power of a new technology."



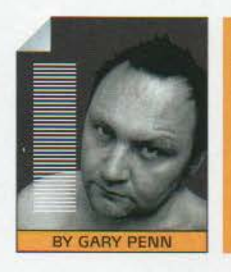
Although they look like they could be real people, they aren't. These faces from Genemation GenHead are the result of a facial generation algorithm, and hence are copyright-free, don't need to sign forms and won't make outragous demands



The genemation game

At the recent Game Developers Conference, Genemation launched two products. The first was an update of GenHead, a package which enables artists to create photorealistic heads using a set of simple slider controls for attributes such as gender, race and age, as well as the usual physical dimensions of facial elements. Based on a statistic model of what a face consists of, it also lets you breed faces together to create family sets. These 2D textures can then be made up into animated 3D heads or applied to a developer's custom mesh for integration within games.

The other release was a new product – GenCrowd. Specifically designed for the rapid population of backgrounds in sports games or massively multiplayer online games, its focus is speed – using it, you can create 1,000 heads within an hour. As with GenHead, facial attributes can be varied as well as family sets created. And what's also important in the context of real-word games is because all the faces are generated by an algorithm, there are no copyright issues – something that is likely to become an increasing concern for publishers when the photorealistic era arrives.



BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Story time

Once upon a time I thought stories in games were worthless, mainly because they just felt so... incongruous. If I wanted to enjoy a story, I read a comic or book, watched a film or listened to a song. If I wanted a less passive experience, I played games, usually with abstract tokens.

Sure, I have fond memories of some text adventures (particularly Infocom's interactive fiction) and graphic adventures (usually from LucasArts). But, typically, the self-conscious 'interactive stories' were simple tree structures. Your involvement was marginal, with no sense that you could influence the outcome.

These days, the toys are far less esoteric and their connection to stories somehow more natural. The stories aren't necessarily any better, though – I just find the use of a story more useful, as a tool and a part of development.

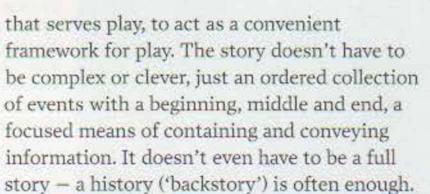
It took years to appreciate the benefits, but now the story is just another toyset component that serves play, to act as a convenient framework for play. The story doesn't have to be complex or clever, just an ordered collection of events with a beginning, middle and end, a focused means of containing and conveying information. It doesn't even have to be a full story – a history ('backstory') is often enough.

A story helps create a context for components, bringing them together into a more cohesive whole and shaping the product as a whole. Designing without a clear direction can become a drag – and if you stop moving forwards for too long in development, you sink.

A story helps create and clarify potential characters, roles (beyond star, co-star and extra), actions, activities and moments. (Identified moments are useful targets for designers. Entertainment is all about 'moments'.)

With a story, there's usually conflict and resolution (problem solving) and cause and effect, just like in play. Just like stories, games have obvious large portions divided into smaller ones – the feast conveniently served in manageable courses. These days, the use of plotting is more in evidence, with the classic three-act structure commonly copied. Enmity, empathy, protagonist objectives, subgoals, obstacles, actions, antagonist confrontations, inciting events, plot twists – all the shit covered in screenwriting courses, all of it relevant to games. That doesn't mean games can't work without a story but it is a convenient means to an end, which is desirable.

With its more recent *TOCA* releases, Codemasters admirably attempts to give more prominence to the storyline in the characteristically clinical racing genre. This worthwhile pursuit will become more common in other genres such as sports.



> "A story creates a sense of place, purpose, direction and resolution for players... suggesting more than is seen, or heard, or done"

A story can reduce abstraction and make unusual elements more credible and accessible. It can justify everything from appropriate events to the relationship between components. A story creates a sense of place, purpose, direction and resolution for players, defining reasons for why they are where they are, how they got there, why they're doing what they're doing, and their involvement in proceedings – suggesting more than is seen, or heard, or done.

Half-Life 2 has you asking questions from the outset and gagging to know more. You want to go along for the ride. You don't feel overtly constrained because there's room to breathe within the linearity – it's not a thin line to be trodden. It feels like pretentious theatre – not a million miles away from that at the heart of The Man Who Knew Too Little.

Now the aim is not to create stories for players, but to create opportunities for stories to be told by players through contemporary puppet theatres – providing players with suitable repertoire and the (dramatic) scope for them to use it – and end up having something to talk about afterwards.

The scope for storytelling occurs more readily in play when we use themed (focused) real toysets such as Masquerade Madness Barbie or Action Man Love Party. This form of casual play is becoming the norm in virtual form. Playing with and within well-defined microcosms encourages post-football-like banter, usually because of the chance to affect and be affected by chain reactions. The more those events involve 'real' characters (and situations), the more widely engaging the self-made story becomes (see *GTA*).

The problem isn't the use of story, but how well it's used – how much it interferes with or constrains play. The *Metal Gear Solid* series has many clever and entertaining play ideas but is hampered by dreary cinematic pretensions and clumsy use of a banal story to justify every trivial detail, like it matters or I care or can't figure it out for myself.

The play – the pivotal role in a story – has to be made engaging for players (performers), not viewers (the audience). The player is the star. The play is like jazz: masturbatory. But the wanker should not be the author. Play should drive the story as much as the story drives play. Then we will all live happily ever after.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki

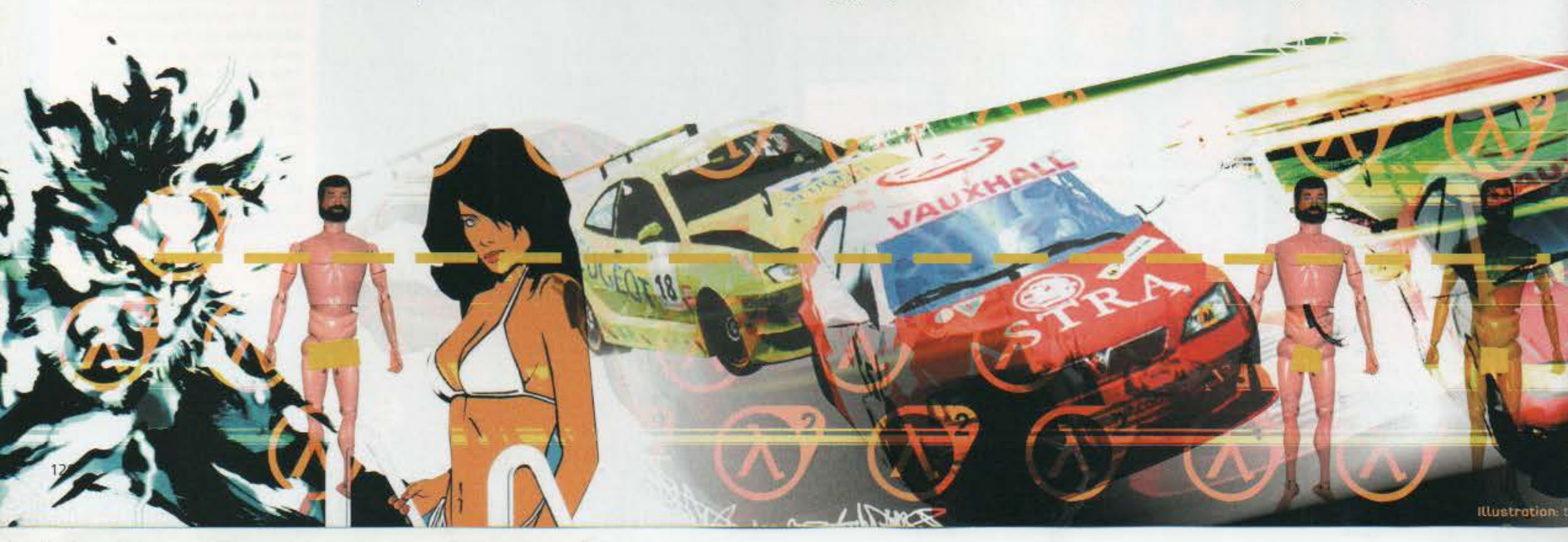


Illustration:



BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Taking the war online

It all began with a terrorist attack. On June 27, 1976, on board Air France flight 139 from Israel via Athens to Paris, seven Palestinian militants, smuggled on board at Athens, produced machine pistols and insisted the pilot divert to Africa. In Uganda, where Idi Amin had agreed to give them safe haven, the Palestinians released the crew and all non-Jewish passengers, but kept 105 Israelis hostage. The Popular Front For The Liberation Of Palestine gunmen announced executions would begin in 48 hours. At midnight on July 3, after negotiations lead nowhere, an Israeli strike force hit the airport. Two Boeing 707s and a Hercules unloaded 200 Israeli commandos, two jeeps and a black Mercedes – a replica of Amin's limo. An hour later, 30 Ugandan troops and all seven hijackers had been killed. The hostages were on a military flight back to Israel. Just one Israeli soldier and three hostages lost their lives.

It was the most successful hostage rescue strike in human history. The US military was so impressed that they tasked the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to develop ways for US soldiers to get the same kind of training. What the Israelis had done, it transpired, was to build an exact scale model of the Entebbe airport in the Negev desert. (It turned out the airport had been built by an Israeli firm.) For six days, Israeli commandos practiced landing on the airstrip and assaulting the passenger terminal where the hostages were held. When they arrived at the real airport, they'd won the attack a hundred times before.

DARPA were fascinated, but flummoxed. They couldn't possibly build scale models of every possible battlefield and hostage situation. That would mean building a scale model of the whole planet. That year, Nicholas Negroponte, founder of MIT's Media Laboratory, was contracted to the Department Of Defense. DARPA approached him for advice, and he proposed a simple solution: a virtual one. They would build technology that simulated various battlefield situations, in which soldiers could practice as if in the real world. Computer technology had barely squeezed itself out of room-sized mainframes, so they used video. The project was so successful, the US military began to make video-simulation models of every airport in the Middle East. That program evolved into the US military's simulation arm, which among other things bought up Atari *Battlezone* arcade machines en masse, and converted the *Doom* engine to show soldiers with realistic guns.

> "We call our games tactical decision aids. Our thing is not making people shoot better, it's making people think better"

Now, nearly 30 years after the Entebbe assault, virtual simulations of battlefield and hostage situations are a core component of US military training. The man who invented the machine gun, Hiram Maxim, did so after a friend told him: "If you want to pile up gold, invent a killing machine." Now, the US military has enough money to fund the most advanced of all virtual worlds. It spent $10 million to develop *America's Army* – an online game like many others, except it's free and an advert for serving your country. What many don't know is that *America's Army* monitors the statistics of players. When one shows up at a recruitment office, the US army can access online records to gauge the potential recruit's fighting skills.

But now the military project that began at Entebbe airport has come full circle. The US military has decided to build a scale model of the whole planet after all. Except they're building it online. **Dr Michael Macedonia** heads the US Army's Executive Office For Simulation, Training And Instrumentation, where he oversees the development of virtual warzones. They've commissioned the developers of *There*, a massive online virtual world, to build an entire planet Earth – a carbon copy of the real one. They have started with Kuwait City and, within two years, plan to have modelled the entire world.

Macedonia talked with me about what he was hoping to achieve: "The reason we started funding the development of these games was to teach soldiers. That was our audience – not civilians or kids, but soldiers." You might well never get to play this game, but you can see a video (visit www.forterrainc.com/demo_mil.html). In fact, to Macedonia it's not a game at all: "We call our games tactical decision aids. Our thing is not making people shoot better, it's making people think better." It was the roleplaying, not just the point-and-shoot features, which made the *There* game engine so appealing. "What's a soldier's experience in Iraq or Afghanistan? Who's the enemy? How do I get these people to not necessarily like me, but to relate to me? How can I keep a riot from starting when the food runs out?" Macedonia asks. "*America's Army* says it's a firstperson shooter. Our games have moved way beyond that. We went from a verbal culture to a written culture, when Homer wrote his stories down. And now we have this medium where we can take people through those experiences. We can do that today in the military, and share those stories, and save lives."

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta

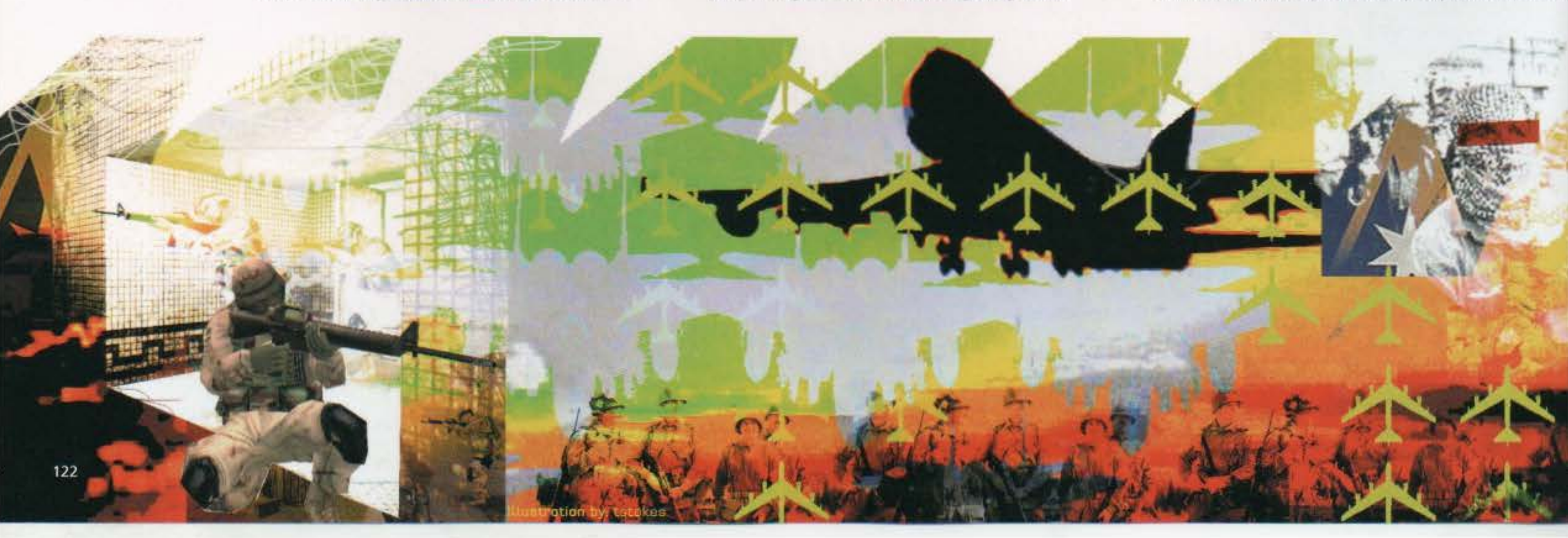


Illustration by: tstokes


BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION

Get out your handheld

So here we are again. As the last generation of hardware is brutally clubbed to death barely moments after ditching its training bra, we face yet another brave, new dawn in the history of interactive entertainment. This time around things are a little different from the usual console slugfest. This time it's a whole new battle for Nintendo, whose handheld family hasn't faced a genuine threat to its existence since Sega choked its Game Gear to death on batteries and Atari's Lynx was laughed out of the auditorium for wetting its pants in the middle of an ill-judged rap about how cool it was to be left-handed.

I have to confess that I've always loved the idea of handheld gaming more than the reality. Admittedly, I signed up for *Tetris* mania along with everyone else and their grandmother, but that was a rare example of software and hardware complementing each other perfectly.

> Who wouldn't prefer to 'enjoy' a photograph of a naked Caprice than one of Stephen Fry stripped from the waist down?

Since then, technology has struggled to play catch up. I've lost track of the number of Game Boy games I've wanted to play, or tried to play, but given up on because the screen was too blurry, or there wasn't a 4,000-watt light source directly overhead. In the end it just became too much of a hassle, and – GBA *Scrabble* aside – it had been years since I picked up a Game Boy of any configuration. Heck, even the SP's underpowered frontlight tended to bleach out the visuals into insipid pastel shades. Of course, that's all changed now. Just before Christmas I caved in to the voices in my head, and bought a DS. I immediately fell in love – here was a simple, unpretentious games system upon which I could play several years' backlog of Game Boy Advance games, with no blurring or a need to sit beneath a giant halogen bulb. I could see the graphics in their unfettered glory, and finally experience the gameplay as it was meant to be played. And that's before I even got to the touchscreen. Yes, it's kind of under-designed and functional-looking on an aesthetic level, but it has such glorious, hidden depths. *Super Mario 64 DS* may have given me erotic pangs of nostalgia, but it was the minigames that set me reeling. That thing where you have to pull back on the catapult with the stylus? Genius – a better demo of what the DS is capable of than any 3D animation of poxy swimming fish. Doubtless we're only just experiencing what touchscreen gaming is capable of. And this comes from someone who initially dismissed the stylus as the stupidest idea since Scented TrampSheaths™. Some of you may be nauseated to note that this was the first time I'd ever bought a game or piece of hardware on import, but you'll doubtless be glad to hear that by now I had the bug. The minute Sony's PSP was out in Japan, I was on to my nearest import Johnny to secure myself a machine. It arrived with a copy of *Everybody's Golf* and *Ridge Racers*. Very nice it looks too. Slick, great graphics, large, crisp screen, funny wobbly button thing on the left-hand side... It's just not very friendly, is it?

The difference between the DS and the PSP is the difference between a slightly dumpy, scruffy feller who tells the best jokes, and is kind-hearted and considerate, who you could take home to your mother, and a flash city boy who has zero personality, but works out at the gym every day, wears a sharp suit and would probably spit champagne in your mother's face then call her a 'working class whore'.

While I'm sure there will be some splendid games eventually released on the PSP, there's something about it that's sterile and off-putting like a pre-Star Wars sci-fi movie. Of course, because I'm a ludicrous idiot who enjoys spending money he doesn't have, I possess a Nintendo DS to compare it to, and to give me a hug, and whisper reassuring words in my ear whenever the PSP cruelly knocks me to the floor, and forces me to kiss the dog.

It seems somehow inevitable that the DS will be outsold by the PSP – and it has nothing to do with content, or Sony's considerable marketing clout. To all intents and purposes the mainstream media has made up its mind as to which of the two will be the biggest seller. Even before we know a release date it's already being tipped as the 'must-have' gadget of 2005. But of course the PSP looks better in photos. Who wouldn't prefer to 'enjoy' a photograph of a naked Caprice than one of Stephen Fry stripped from the waist down and squatting above a mirror? But I think we all know which one would offer the best conversation over dinner.

It's a lesson Nintendo has never learned. Compare the swollen stomach of the SNES to the sleek, black lines of the Mega Drive, or the freakish Nintendo 64 to the original PlayStation. The GameCube almost got it right, but spoiled things with its absurd controller, which was a bit like releasing a new model of Porsche, with a giant, luminous potato stuck to the roof.

People are always going to judge books by their cover. We celebrate the beautiful, and slap down the ugly. I'm just hoping against hope that for once people can look beyond the mere cosmetic and realise that the DS is the true future of handheld gaming.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



inbox


Issue 148

Having recently gorged ourselves on *Fable* on the Xbox (you can kick a chicken? Excellent!) we came upon a simple idea to further the videogame experience even further. Obviously upon starting the game the first thing we noticed was the vast array of regional accents in the game, randomly assigned to characters.

Our idea is thus: wouldn't it be much more realistic if each village was assigned a seperate accent? And if you come across people who have a different accent to the majority of the village you could work out where they call home. In a game where social structures (marriage, drinking culture, etc) have been so meticulously implicated it seems bizarre that they would choose such a scattergun approach with the vocals.

Anyhow, here's hoping that Peter Molyneux reads this and takes note for *Fable 2*.
Andy, Matt & Tim

Surely Molyneux is a man who needs fewer new ideas, not more? Or were the scattershot accents deliberately designed to appeal to Americans who think the UK is just one big village as it is?

It is a rare occasion: an **Edge** review that I completely disagree with. You spend 125 words berating the dreadful control system in *Resident Evil 4* (**E**147), but then concede that: 'Doubtless the control system was pitched this way as a result of extensive playtesting [sic]'. Oh really? You see, from where I sit, it would appear that playtesting was a rather rushed, last-minute affair. Even more bizarrely, you qualify your bold assurance with: '...and the effect certainly serves to keep you on your toes and forever ready with a finger on the trigger'. You're saying that the controls are deliberately bad to make the game more exciting? If I drove a car whose steering wheel only turned 45 degrees from left to right, I guess it would certainly keep me on my toes. In fact it would probably scare me witless, but for all the wrong reasons.

I'm willing to forgive the contradictory setting of Spanish-speaking villagers in what appears to be 17th century Romania. I might even forgive the self-conscious and hamfisted way the developers have jumped on the 'Don't mention the Z-word' bandwagon. But I cannot forgive a game that expects you to defend yourself against multiple enemies but doesn't let you look around corners, step left or right, and that glues you to the spot giving you a 45-degree aiming 'cone' whenever you want to fire a gun. And neither should you.

After only two hours' play, it was obvious to me that the difficulty level was toned down to accommodate the clumsy and unrealistic controls. Even though the game is easy, I found myself asking, 'Why can't I step left or right?' and 'Why can't I run or walk while shooting?' I can do these things in real life, yet the developer has taken these basic abilities away from me in their game. If it's deliberate, then it makes the game feel unnecessarily artificial. If it's an oversight, then it's equally inexcusable when games such as *Splinter Cell 2* get their controls so right.

Why could you (and countless other reviewers) not see this? Because the graphics are so hypnotically pretty? Because it's been hyped for so long? Because Capcom are such a respected company? The story of the Emperor's New Clothes suddenly springs to mind.
Richard Cross

I cannot forgive a game that expects you to defend yourself but doesn't let you look around corners, step left or right, and that glues you to the spot

The comments to which you're referring actually relate to evidence from game director Hiroyuki Kobayashi himself. Have a read of the interview in **Edge** 146 and you'll see for yourself.

A colleague and I have launched an anti-abuse and anti-racism campaign for gamers online at www.fairplayonline.co.uk.

We will be running an editorial to help create public awareness through the Kick It Out organisation which is involved in the Kick Racism Out Of Football campaign. They have indicated to us that they receive a lot of complaints about racism online and have difficulties in getting it removed and are happy to help us create public awareness. We will be focusing mainly on the gaming communities and their chat rooms and clients, forums and the game servers themselves. It's a growing problem.

We're not entirely sure when guidelines or an online policing network, which has been suggested, will be a reality. It's our belief that it could be. What we can say is there are many people of all ages facing this growing problem. I personally have a 14-year-old son. I have stopped him playing in online game servers because of the amount of abuse-related incidents I have seen.

We are trying to get as much support as possible early on as we have only just launched our website. If you can offer us any support or advice we would greatly appreciate it.

We have been researching this for nine months and are in for the long haul. We just need help creating awareness and raising support by getting people to register on our site forum. We are also going to be putting resources in place to help people that already run game servers deal with the problems more effectively.

Please show us your support in any way that you can.
Lloyd Simpson

I'd like to congratulate Tim Guest on writing the finest column I've


Richard Cross suggests that *Resident Evil 4*'s difficulty level was toned down in order to make allowance for its control scheme



ever read in **Edge**. I thought that Nagoshi-san's amazing insights would never be beaten (except perhaps by Mr Biffo coming out of left field). However, Tim's article in **E**147 regarding the Wilde Cunningham character from *Second Life* was the first page in **Edge** that has ever moved me to tears.

My sister is physically disabled and attends a day centre that is probably not much different to the Boston centre that Tim describes. His coverage of the real people and their avatars was a brilliant example of what games can achieve as a force for good, with a little bit of imagination and an open mind.

Technology can provide opportunities to people who would otherwise have limited access to the world. Games and game-inspired software can be part of that. I just wish that positive, thought-provoking writing like this got coverage in the wider world beyond **Edge**.
Chris Preston



Nedeem Augbaya has found that nothing works for his girlfriend like a bit of Wario

The always-online game console raises as many spectres as it does opportunities: does anyone really welcome to prospect of patches, and the even gloomier possibility of patches we have to pay for? But the potential is certainly alluring, as games like *Second Life* have shown with their liberated handling of user-created content and in-game economies.

What will be the point of struggling to achieve the perfect score to secure a rocket launcher in Resident Evil when we can simply buy it for $1.50?

I am reading with interest all the latest information from GDC 05 regarding Xbox 2. A concern I have, which I believe is shared by many gamers, relates to premium content. Xbox 2 will have a micro-marketplace which will be used for mini downloads over Xbox Live. The example used was 99¢ for a new car colour, etc. This sounds great in principle but how can I ever know if this content is truly new? What if this 'new' content actually already exists on the disc and is merely being unlocked by a gamer's eager 99¢ purchase?

Whereas once a gamer was rewarded with unlockables through challenging gameplay, now the canny developer can simply invite us to purchase them instead. It's a quick fix for the game-guide generation.

What will be the point of struggling to achieve the perfect score to secure a rocket launcher in *Resident Evil* when we can simply buy it for $1.50?
John Dillon

I'd like to say thanks to the team behind the original *Wario Ware* on the GBA. I've been trying for ages to find a game that my girlfriend and I could play together and this is the little gem that has made that vision a reality.

It's no newsflash that playing games with other people is much better than playing on your own, but playing a game with your girlfriend is like the Holy Grail of videogamers' relationships. It was thought, for a long time, by me and my gaming buddies that there were only a few girls that played videogames worth courting – and they all worked on Bits...

I knew from old that my girlfriend was a big *Alex Kidd* fan – so much of a fan that when in university I hatched a cunning plan to bring my Master System down from the attic and up on the train just so she could have a go on it. And it did transpire to be 'a' go. I think she played on it once in the 18 months the little black box was gathering dust under my TV. I had planned to use this as a shoehorn to get her playing some of my preferred titles at the time. *Mario Kart 64* was boring, *GTA 3* was funny for five, maybe 15, minutes and *Shenmue 2* seemed to serve as some kind of virtual bedtime story. I was heartened to hear that once when off work sick she spent all day playing *Perfect Dark*, but when the time came for some boy-on-girl gunplay the interest didn't last past one game...

Sonic Advance and then later *Super Mario Advance 4* looked, for a few weeks at least, as though they could tip the balance in my favour but again no joy. The advent of *Super Smash Brothers Melee* proved to be 'rubbish', *Mario Kart Double Dash* was still boring, *Soul Calibur 2* too complicated, *OutRun 2* too hot, *Halo* too cold, but then... *Wario Ware* was just right.

So many thanks to the boys from Nintendo for creating a game that Teri and I can sit on the sofa and play together, passing the GBA back and forth like some 21st century love spoon. I think the achievement is a testament to the quality of the game's design and realisation, and absolutely nothing to do with my tenacity which, on reflection, probably only served to compound the problem.
Nedeem Augbaya

What's interesting about Nintendo's success in wooing female players is that it hasn't tried to target them as 'women' by making assumptions about the characters and situations that will interest them. Instead, it has targeted them as non-gamers, trying to invent new modes of gaming rather than simply 'pinking' existing genres.

Would someone please tell Rob Collins (Inbox, E148) that the 'Euro-style' replacement power cord he received for his Xbox is most probably the result of human error, rather than anything more sinister by Microsoft.

I, along with many other people I know, have received a replacement cord and can confirm that the plug on it is most definitely of the three-pin UK-style variety. I suggest that Mr Collins contacts Microsoft on 0800 0289276 and takes the issue up with them.
Paul Shotton

Well, yes, but a mailing error is much less entertaining than a personal vendetta, isn't it? Why spoil Rob's fun?

It's March 19 and I'm spending my day off watching television. I should be spending it playing *Resident Evil 4* (or outside getting some fresh air kicking a ball about – but that's a different argument). But on my trek around Brighton town centre I could not find a single copy!

There are two branches of Game in the town centre and both had sold out of the game by 2pm on the day of release. I tried WH Smiths, Woolworths and MVC but to my shock these shops have stopped selling GameCube games all together. I haven't bought a GC game since *Animal*

Continued

Crossing but didn't realise that support for the machine had slipped so much. Who'd have thought that it was once seen as a serious competitor to the Xbox? On my visits to Virgin and HMV I spent ten minutes looking for the tiny GC section only to find that they had already sold out of their limited stock.

I find it ridiculous that, as a customer eager to splash out my hard earned cash on a product, no one is in a position to accept my money. How can Capcom expect to make back their quite considerable outlay on this venture when it has fallen at the final hurdle of actually getting people to buy the game?

James Tully

The GameCube's low profile in general nowadays is hardly Capcom's fault – especially after the firm's early committment to the platform with its big five exclusive (albeit now not-so-exclusive) titles. Of course, the bigger question is, with DS and soon PSP titles clamouring for shelf space in retailers across the UK, what will be squeezed out next?

I was very sorry to learn that Steven Poole is leaving. Sure, we still have the greats like Mr Biffo (I've been particularly enjoying Tim Guest's words, and Gary Penn's likewise, but it won't be quite the same without him there). I will be purchasing Trigger Happy, something I probably should have done a long time ago. I would also like to thank him (and everyone at Edge too) for inspiring me to take up writing as a profession. I've had support from people around me, even yourselves in E132, but his articles have made me want to realise that dream even more. Thank you.

Steven Messer

Kutaragi's acknowledgement of the UMD's read-only limitations in your **Edge** Online article has fired up my conspiracy theory glands again: seeing as the new, 1Gb version of the MiniDisc was unveiled only months before the PSP was released, is it possible that the PSP's media is in fact more similar than different to plain old MDs, deliberately given their curvy shape so as to be unusable in normal MD recorders?

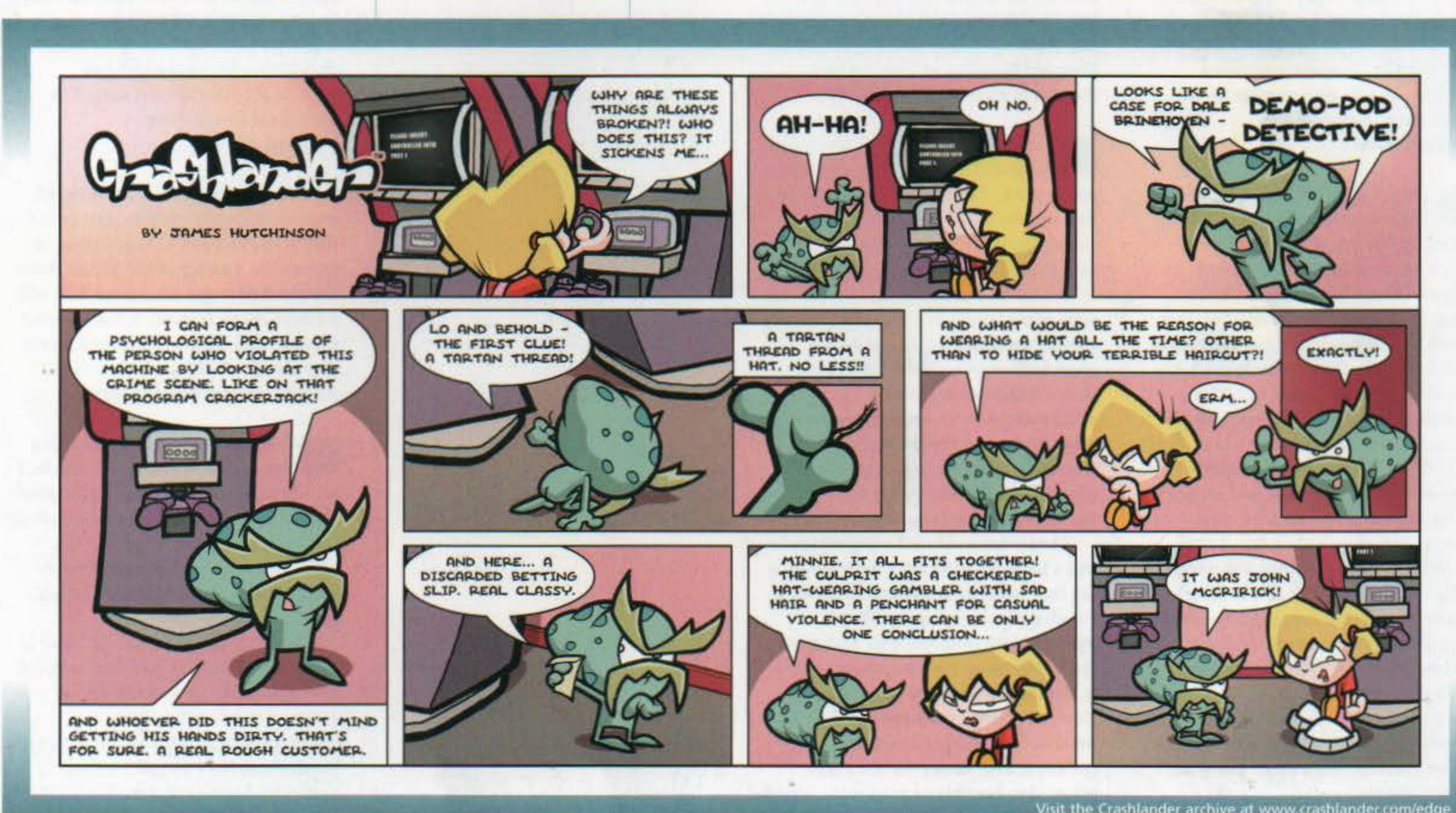
Does Sony realise that, had it made the PSP's media a format easily transferrable from PSP to a PC or Mac, it would have turned the PSP into a true multifunction device? Far more than an iPod killer, the console could have also become everyone's favourite portable movie player and homebrew-game development platform. While I realise that 1Gb memory sticks will gradually become mainstream, there is no way they will become inexpensive enough within the next four years for everyone to be able to buy packets of ten blank 1Gb MS cards, whereas the equivalent packet of blank UMDs could have cost a fiver, assuming a pricing model similar to that of MiniDiscs.

Still, there's always hope that someone, somewhere, will cut his MD recorder to pieces and jury-rig a UMD recorder...

M Papadopoulos

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